taking a chance (on love)

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Gale "Buck" Cleven, John Clarence "Bucky" Egan, Robert "Rosie" Rosenthal, Harry Crosby, John B. "Jack" Kidd, Ken Lemmons, Curtis Biddick

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Period-Typical Homophobia, Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, But also somehow, Canon Compliant, at least until the epilogue of episode 9, hand-wavey explanations of how old-timey technology works, anything I get wrong about the show is intentional canon divergence, not me not remembering, Bucky Has Self-Worth Issues, Buck can't handle his own feelings, until he can, no beta we die like curt, not a songfic, but not not a songfic, Canon-Typical Violence, the only thing more egregious than my comma use is my use italics, Angst, Angst with a Happy Ending, Smut, Frottage, Hand Jobs, Blow Jobs, First Time Blow Jobs, thigh fucking, Fluff, Slow Burn, but they also bang in chapter one, Unreliable Narrator, Suicidal Thoughts, Suicidal Ideation

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taking a chance (on love)

by FingerGunz

Summary

Gale,

There are times when I try to remember who I was before the war, but all I can remember is you saying that this would be the version of me worth knowing. Do you still believe that?

Yours,

Bucky

Or:
Bucky and Buck try to make it through the war and try not to lose each other.

(Or: I lost my damn mind and did a cannon rewrite from Bucky's POV)

Notes

OMG every fic in this pairing is just *chef's kiss* amazing. I am so scared to be adding to this incredible fandom.

***This is based on the characters in the SHOW, not the real men who served. ***

See the end of the work for more notes

- Translation into Русский available: Рискуя (о любви) by Linda_0210

Flight School

Chapter Summary

Bucky learns something in flight school that he never imagined.

Chapter Notes

No spoilers, but the song Bucky sings in this chapter is 'Taking a Chance on Love' by Benny Goodman with Helen Forrest. It's a good listen for this chapter.

https://youtu.be/6Af_PSZpiEU?si=0BnjMkQbTlfufN5Z

(And, yeah it's the title of the fic, cause I am the MOST creative)

A weekend pass wasn't enough time to go anywhere but town, so the boys of the Hundredth piled into their jeeps and went to one of the three bars in town. Fat Andrews, the bar they were currently at, was a hole-in-the-wall tavern, that served cold beer, cold food, and was the only one they hadn't managed to be banned from yet.

To his surprise, Bucky had been able to convince Buck to come with them. 'It's good for the men to see you outside of base.' Bucky had said, smiling in a way he knew Buck could never really say no to, so now he is sitting amicably next to Buck as the rounds keep coming and the men keep getting drunker and drunker. *He* keeps getting drunker and drunker.

Walla Walla is a town so small that even on the weekends the bars closed early. It's just barely past midnight when the bartender lets them know it's last call, the boys all rush up to the bar trying to get one last drink in before they have to head back to base.

Bucky starts to follow but Buck puts his hand on his shoulder and pushes him back down, "I think you've had enough tonight, Bucky. How 'bout we get some fresh air?"

Normally, his first instinct would be to drink *more*, just to be contrary, but not with Buck. He likes the undivided attention Buck gives him and the heavy feeling of his hand on his shoulder, so he'll do what Buck asks.

Bucky's head falls back against the booth as he smiles at Buck, "That's usually my line. You tryin' to get me alone, sweetheart?"

Buck huffs a laugh at the harmless flirtation, "Shoot, Bucky, you found me out."

Warmth starts to bloom from Bucky's chest, creeping up his neck and into his cheeks, his smile threatens to split his face. He hopes that Buck just thinks it's the alcohol, shit, *he* hopes it's just the alcohol.

He starts to slide out of the booth, grabbing and shaking Buck's shoulder on his way out. "Well, since you asked so nicely, how can I say no?"

Bucks slides out after him and they head out, waving at the rest of the guys getting their drinks at the bar. No one really asks where they're going, or cares, they're used to the two of them going off on their own. When they exit the bar, the streets are wet, shiny from a rain that has already stopped. It could be the way the streetlights shine off the pavement or the fuzziness of his own drunken vision but it adds a movie-like quality to the empty streets.

Buck's a few steps behind him, keeping an eye on him like a sheepdog on a drunken sheep, but he feels good, loose. He feels like singing, so he does, "Blue skies smilin' at me. Nothin' but blue skies do I see!"

His singing is awful, they both know it, but when he twirls around, he sees a small smile on Buck's face and well, that's enough for him.

"Bluebirds singin' a song..." He hears Buck laugh behind him.

"Aw c'mon Bucky, don't you know anything else?"

Bucky turns, halting his twirling steps, clutching his chest as if struck, "You don't like my singing?"

Buck laughs again, despite himself, "Never said anything about the singin', Bucky, just the song."

Sweeping forward, Bucky grabs Buck's arms, taking large graceful strides like a ballroom dancer, taking poor Buck with him. He starts singing, "Here I go again; I hear those trumpets blow again," Buck is laughing and going along with it, almost endeared by Bucky's boisterous singing, so he won't stop, "All aglow again - taking a chance on love."

He keeps singing and he and Gale keep spinning and laughing. He doesn't think he's ever seen Buck laugh so much, or smile so much, and maybe that's what emboldens him to do what he does next.

He spins Buck under his arm like he would a dame, and Buck laughs louder at the action. But it comes to an abrupt end when he pulls Buck back into him wrapping his arms around his waist, chest to chest. Bucky stops singing and Buck stops breathing.

He's always been a handsy guy, wrapping his arm around Buck's shoulders, rustling his hair, but he's never been this close, not close enough to feel the other man's breath on his lips, never close enough to see that Gale's eyelashes are blond, just like his hair.

The moment feels like it lasts forever, and not nearly long enough, but Buck steps back, and Bucky lets his arms fall away.

Something *happened*. He can't say what, but Buck won't look at him. And just like that, what happened was over.

Buck's hand comes up to rub the back of his neck, "We should get back to base."

But Bucky doesn't want to go back to base. He saw something in Buck's eyes and he wants to know what it was. He pulls on his mask of normalcy, and smiles big, friendly-like, letting his body loosen into the drunk lout everyone thinks he is, "You gonna make me go back to base on my birthday?"

The lame joke breaks the awkwardness and Buck levels him with an incredulous look but he's holding back a smile, "Your birthday isn't for another month-"

Buck continues, barreling through Buck's comment, "We're staying at the motel, sleeping in real beds with real privacy." He throws his arm around Buck's shoulders, waving his hand in the air like he is pitching a new film. Buck relaxes, finally, "Imagine it, Buck, a whole night free of Crank's snoring."

Buck tilts his head and finally meets his eyes again, tonguing the toothpick in his mouth, "But I'd still have to deal with yours."

With his arm still around Buck's shoulders, he feels Buck's breath against his cheek. He knows he's won and he slaps Buck's chest lightly, "I didn't say it'd be perfect."

Buck takes a deep breath and lets it out as a sigh, but Bucky can see the smile he's trying to hide, "All right, Bucky, all right."

In his glee, Bucky shakes his shoulders, "That's the spirit, Buck!"

Bucky doesn't let go of Buck's shoulders, guiding them down the empty street toward the only motel in town. It's not much but the rooms are clean and cheap. He's brought a girl or two here, most of them have. Not *Gale*, but most of them.

He walks in the door to the office, an older lady is reading a magazine behind the desk, she doesn't even look at him, and that's fine with him. He puts on his most dazzling smile, leaning his forearm on the desk, and says, "Two rooms, please."

If he's lucky Buck will stay with him for a bit before they go to bed, but Bucky knows better than to push his luck.

"Only got the one room, has two beds through," she looks up and narrows her eyes at them.

"Didn't realize you were that full," Bucky says trying to decipher exactly what the looks she's giving him.

The woman sets down her magazine with a humph, and starts digging around in the desk drawer, "We're *not*, but some of your buddies made a hell of a mess in the rooms last night, still trying to clean it up. "

She dangles the key in front of Bucky, but when he goes to take it she snaps it back into her hand, "You two aren't going to cause trouble like that are you?"

Before Bucky can even think about what to say, Buck steps forward leaning against the desk with that damned charming smile of his, and says, "Ma'am, I can promise we won't be any trouble, we're jus' too tired to drive back to base. If you give me the names of the boys who caused the trouble, I'll be sure to give them a talking to when we get back."

The woman cracks a smile, no one is immune to the Cleven charm. Bucky watches his lashes brush his cheek. Definitely not him.

"What a nice young man, thank you!" She hands the key over and points vaguely out the window, "It'll be the last room on the end, number twenty. I'll get the names and slip them under your door in the morning."

Bucky slides the money across the desk and nods, "Thank you, ma'am."

Buck nods on his way out following Bucky out the door.

They walk across the parking lot of the U-shaped hotel and Bucky can't help himself, he snickers, "What a nice young man you are, Buck."

With a light laugh, Buck responds, "I am a nice young man."

They reach the other side of the motel and the room next to them looks like it's boarded up for a tornado.

Buck leans over to examine the damage through the unboarded part of the window, as Bucky opens the door.

"She weren't kidding, those fellas really did do a number on that room."

"That's a problem for tomorrow. C'mon, Buck."

The room is just as he remembers it, sparse, but clean and comfortable. Two beds, a chair, a small table, and a radio. If he's lucky Buck will stay up with him and play cards. Listen to music. Talk about everything and anything.

If he's lucky, he'll get to spend time with Buck away from the men away from the base. Just them.

They toe off their boots leaving them by the door and he moves to turn on the radio, but Buck says, "We should go to bed, John. It's already late."

"Aw c'mon, Buck. Just for a while."

"We told that lady we wouldn't cause a fuss."

Bucky smiles and raises his eyebrow, "*You* said we wouldn't cause a fuss. If we don't turn on the radio, I'll just have to fill the silence."

"Bucky, please-"

"I thought the cards were a frame-up, I never would try," Bucky sings, he knows that Buck's not actually mad at him, he can't smother his smile no matter how hard he tries.

"Bucky," There's an exasperated fondness in his voice that Bucky wants

more of, it makes him sing even louder.

"But now I'm taking the game up," Buck starts to approach him but he darts around the bed, only increasing in enthusiasm and volume.

"Bucky your gunna wake up the whole neighborhood," but Buck's laughing and chasing Bucky and he knows Buck doesn't really mean it.

"And the ace of hearts is high," Bucky's breathless and drunk, and Gale's going to corner him soon "Things are mending now; I see a rainbow blending now."

Buck grabs him and tries to cover his mouth but Bucky ducks away the words getting mumbled underneath Buck's hand. His mind is swimming in the haze of alcohol, warm and soft and loose. Buck's hands are all over him grasping at his clothes, touching him, trying to pin him down. He's surrounded by Buck's breathless laughter and his own laughing and singing.

It's everything he didn't know he wanted.

He slips away again. Not willing to let this end. Wanting to keep Buck's attention on him at any cost.

Finally, he thinks, Buck's the one chasing him, not the other way around.

Maybe he's distracted as to where that thought came from, when Buck tackles him around the middle onto the bed, they wrestle, rolling on top of one another and back. Bucky feels more alive now than he's ever felt with anyone else. He never wants this to stop and he's not sure what that means, but he never felt like this with any of the girls he's been with. Not even close.

But then he realizes he's enjoying this *too* much and that startles him enough that Buck gets the upper hand and ends up on top of him, holding his arms above his head. The laughing stops and Buck stills, smile falling off his face.

There's no hiding the hardness in his slacks. The fact that Buck is straddling his hips, breathing heavily definitely isn't helping matters.

Bucky is frozen under Gale's hands like a captured animal. All he can think is that he's fucked this all up. So he swallows and whispers, "I'm sorry."

But Buck just keeps staring into his eyes.

He can't move, he won't. If he stays still, if he doesn't acknowledge it, this might end in something other than the end of their friendship.

But then Buck leans forward, brushing their lips together, softly, so softly that when Bucky's eyes flutter back open he almost thinks he imagined the entire thing.

Buck licks his lips and reaches his hand up to hold the side of Bucky's face, leaning down and pressing their lips together again. John isn't too startled to respond this time, but he still holds back, just moving his lips against Buck's.

They pull apart and Buck rests his forehead onto Bucky's, breathing heavily, eyes still closed. Bucky doesn't know what to do, so he stays still, looking up at Gale's face waiting to see if his eyes open.

It's driving John insane, he's using every iota of self-control to keep himself from pressing back into Buck. To keep from grabbing his face and crushing those perfect lips against his.

Buck moves, slowly, brushing his nose against John's cheek, "I don't wanna stop."

It's all John needed to hear, he finally moves, gently grabbing the back of Gale's neck, "Then don't."

Buck's eyes open with a sharp intake of breath, and he's pushing their lips together again.

This kiss is anything but soft. It's hungry and needy. He's moaning into Buck's mouth. He doesn't even know why this is happening but it doesn't matter. Buck is kissing him in grinding his hips down into his and Bucky won't stop him.

Bucky's hands undo the buttons of Buck's shirt, finally pushing it off his shoulders.

Buck's chest is flushed, his eyes dark and for a moment Bucky can't believe this is real. He leans up pressing a kiss into Gale's collarbone, "God, you're beautiful, Buck."

Buck huffs a laugh, "I'm not a dame, you don't gotta sweet talk me."

He pushes Buck back slightly peppering kisses down his chest, he

finally gets to Buck's nipple and worries between his teeth. Buck gasps and moans above him, grinding their hips together.

Bucky pulls back and looks into Gale's eyes, "No you're not. But it doesn't change the fact that you're beautiful."

A strange fragile look flickers across Buck's face but before Bucky can say anything, Buck surges into his lips biting and licking. His hands fumble at the buttons on John's shirt, he finally gives up and just pulls the shirt over his head. Then Buck's hands are on him, sliding over his chest and back.

It's driving him mad, he can't get enough. This is something he didn't even really know that he wanted. Something he thought he couldn't have. But now that it happening, he wants to try everything.

He flips them over, situating himself over Buck, and Jesus, with his tousled hair and kiss bruised lips, John will never have to think about a lady ever again when he's alone in his bunk.

He trails down Buck's skin, kissing and sucking as he continues down Gale's chest, his stomach, and finally to the waistband of his pants. He looks up at Gale who's risen onto his elbows, "Can I?"

Gale bites his lip, breathing heavily through his nose as he nods.

That's all he needed. He may have been drunk before, but he is stone sober now, he takes off Buck's belt and pulls off his trousers and boxers.

He's never been this close to a man's dick before, but Gale's is beautiful. Hard and dark pink, just a little wet at the tip. Before he really thinks it through, he licks at the wetness there, tasting Buck's precome.

Buck jerks and moans stuffing his forearm into his mouth to muffle the sound.

And that's all it takes to get Bucky addicted, he wants to hear every noise Buck has to make, he wants to take Gale apart.

Bucky runs his hand down Buck's thighs and pushes them open, placing a kiss on the inside of his leg, "No one is around, Buck. Let me hear you."

He takes Buck's cock into his mouth, and a pinched gasp falls from

Gale's lips. It takes him a while to get into a rhythm, he's never done this before. He's sure his technique is awful, but if the sounds Buck is making are anything to go by, must be doing all right.

Buck's hand finds its way to the side of his face and pulls him up from between his legs, kissing him fiercely, licking into his mouth.

Bucky pulls away, a wave of insecurity washing over him, "Was I that bad?"

Buck smiles with a breathy laugh and kisses his again, "God, no," he says against his lips, "You just still got too many goddamn clothes on."

Gales fumbles to unbuckle his pants, refusing to pull away to look at what he's doing, and Bucky laughs into his mouth. Between kisses, "Now, I don't think that's something a nice young man would say."

Bucky learns his lesson when Buck finally removes the rest of his clothes, when he's pulled between Gale's legs and their lengths press together, he lets out a long slow breath.

Against his ear, Buck breathes hotly, "You don't want a nice young man right now, Bucky."

Buck's fingers grip his ass, pulling them closer together. He can barely form words when he feels this good, he moves and Buck moves, and their dicks slide together, causing the best sort of friction Bucky's ever experienced.

Bucky will have marks tomorrow from Gale's fingertips but he doesn't care. He wants to remember this night. He wants Gale's fingerprints stained onto his skin.

They rut against each other, but the friction isn't enough to get them off. John spits in his hand and reaches down wrapping his hand around both of them, pumping them together.

Buck is less controlled than Bucky thought he'd be during sex, his head is tilted back as Bucky kisses his neck, "You're so fucking beautiful, Buck."

He feels Buck's cock pulse in his hand and Bucky kisses Gale through his orgasm, capturing his moans in his mouth. Bucky follows soon after coming hot and sticky between their bodies.

They're both panting, boneless. Bucky still pressed against Buck, head

resting on his shoulder, nose pressed against his neck.

Buck's breathing starts to even out and John wonders if he's falling asleep. He brushes Buck's hair off his forehead, "I'm gunna clean us up, okay?"

Buck nods, eyes half-lidded, Bucky can't believe that this is happening, but he won't pinch himself. If this is a dream, he doesn't want to wake up.

He runs a warm cloth over their bodies cleaning up most of the mess. Buck's body shivers when Bucky touches him, and if Bucky wasn't so damn tired, he'd wanna go again. Instead, he wraps himself around Buck, and Buck reaches back and they fall asleep tangled in each other.

Bucky wakes up and reaches for Buck only to find an empty space beside him. When he finds Buck, he's already dressed and sitting in the chair across from the bed. He's hunched, arms balanced on his knees. Bucky can tell by the look on his face that he's nervous.

Buck's head barely lifts when he notices John wake, eyes looking at his own hands clasped in front of him, "We should head back to base."

It comes out normal, but by the way Buck worries his lip between his teeth, he knows it's all a show.

Bucky sits up letting the sheets fall into his lap, "That's it?" Buck still won't look at him, "That's all you have to say after what happened?"

The sound of the chair sliding back as Buck stands startles Bucky, then he's heading to the door, still not looking at Bucky, "It shouldn't have happened at all, John. I'll meet you by the Jeep."

The door shuts behind Buck's retreat and Bucky runs his hand through his hair, "Whatever you say, Buck."

There is only one time Buck tries to talk about it, days later as they walk back to the barracks. They had the last flight spot so it's just the two of them and the last pinks and purples of the sky.

Buck clears his throat, "Bucky about the other night-"

And Bucky doesn't wanna hear it. He doesn't wanna hear that it was a mistake, that Buck was just lonely, that sometimes guys just do that

and it don't mean nothing.

He's bitter and angry, but stops walking and looks right into Buck's eyes, eyes that widen at the intensity of his stare.

"What are you talking about, Buck? Nothing happened."

Buck opens his mouth, but Bucky just strides off, his long legs help him cover the ground quickly, and he doesn't hear Buck's footsteps behind him.

After that, their group is moved to Nebraska and Buck goes all in for Marge. And him and Buck, they go back to normal.

Well, as normal as it can be when you slept with your best friend. As normal as you can be when you remember the feeling of your lips on theirs. When you remember them sighing against your skin, feeling their arms around you as you slept. As normal as it can be when you want to do it again.

Every time they go out Marge is there. She shows up for every weekend pass they get, and she's beautiful and sweet and smart as a whip and she's perfect for Buck. She even tries to set Bucky up with some of her friends. They're nice. They all are. But they're not Buck. He dances and flirts and calls it a night, he has to put on a show. The show is the fine line keeping their friendship intact.

One thing he does notice though, is that no matter how long it's been, no matter how much she asks, Buck never goes home with Marge. He always returns to base.

God damn boy scout.

Privately, in his innermost thoughts, the ones he'll take to the grave, Bucky can't help but feel *proud*. Of all the people Buck could have broken his code for, it was him. It was John Clarence Egan who challenged Buck's resolve enough that he finally gave in.

The night before Bucky leaves for England they all go to the bar, Marge is there (of course) and she's brought him a lively brunette who likes to drink with him and dance. In another life, she might've been good for him.

At the end of the night, Marge bats those big beautiful eyes at Buck

and he turns her down. Bucky can't entirely push down the satisfaction he feels at that. They drop off the girls and head back to base.

Bucky usually speeds taking turns like the Jeep is a fighter plane. Making it from town to the base in half the time it should take, but not tonight.

Tonight, he takes his time. He drives along the twisting back roads taking detour, after detour. He ships out tomorrow morning at 0800 and while he should go back and get some sleep, he wants to spend every second he can with Buck.

Buck would usually get on his case about getting enough sleep, but tonight, in the seclusion of their jeep, he stays silent, tilting his head back to look at the stars.

They finally arrive at base and Bucky pulls up to the barracks, "I guess this is it."

Buck stares down at his hands, 'This is it."

Bucky swats his arm lightly with the back of his hand, "You think a few weeks will be enough time for you to miss this ugly mug?"

He means it as a joke, something to break the tension, but Buck looks at him from under his lashes, staring at Bucky for a long moment, "Don't need it." He seems more unsure of himself, more tentative, "I'm gonna miss you every second."

Bucky wants to make a joke of it, but he can't, not tonight.

The War

Chapter Summary

War is hell, but Bucky will make sure they both get through it.

Chapter Notes

I was blown AWAY by the response to the first chapter! Thank you to everyone who commented, kudo'd, and read!

I take some pretty large leaps through the plot of the show in this chapter, and somehow it's still 7k words so... enjoy?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He causes a bit of a ruckus in Greenland, and honestly, he feels bad about it. But it had just felt nice for once to be in a group of people who knew nothing about him. Who didn't expect anything from him. There were no awkward pasts or awkward feelings. There were no pregnant silences, he didn't long to press his lips to the pulse in anyone's neck.

It's a weight he didn't know he'd been carrying. He misses Buck like hell, but it is a little freeing without him. So he enjoys it, lets loose, and makes a friend in a man named Ricky, who buys him one too many drinks ending with him breaking a unicorn horn. Narwhal tusk. Whatever.

But the freedom he feels away from Buck is short-lived. When he gets to England, he's pestered by the thoughts of Buck. What Bucky wants to show him when he gets here, things he would find funny, people he wants Buck to meet. There's a space at his side, and it's not freeing anymore, it's just empty.

Bucky's got no girl to write to so he writes to Buck. Just a little note, made it to England, the weather is shitty, and the beer is warm. He sends him a package and asks him to drop it off with the bartender in Greenland, and smiles at his own joke. Thinking about stoic Buck handing over that ceramic unicorn will keep a smile on his face for days to come.

He keeps it short, that way it'll keep him from writing something he'll regret. Like that, he thinks about Buck saying he'll miss him every second. And he wonders what Buck meant by that. That Bucky missed

him even before he even left for England, that sometimes he missed him when they were standing right next to one another. Things like that.

Thorpe Abbotts is quite the change of pace from flight training, there's not a lot of flying but there is a lot of desk work. He spends his time filling recs and more time than he should drinking and gambling with the locals. He meets a girl named Lillian who's pretty and fun, she's nice to spend time with, someone who he can wrap his arm around, someone who makes him feel a little less lonely.

But after a week, he starts to get antsy, there's only so much he can take of scrounging for parachutes and O2 masks. Then finally, the captain or the 389th asks him to fill in as co-pilot.

Bucky puts on an easy grin, "I thought you'd never ask."

His fingers itch as he puts on his flight gear and it feels like it's been years since he's been up. He's missed the clouds and the freedom that comes with being 20,000 feet above everyone else. It's just an observation mission, easy. They fly over France and report back. Nothing too hard, it'll be good just to get in the air again.

But it's not easy, it's not good, it's awful.

Their engine is on fire, and they take a nose dive to put it out. Thankfully the fighters think they're headed for the ground and leave them be, but the second they level out though, the fighters are back on them.

Duval is down and they need a new heading, he had always been alright with maps, so finding a new heading isn't hard, even with the bullets pinging around him. He shouts it back up to the cockpit.

Duval is listing his hand slipping off his chest. If he doesn't keep pressure he'll bleed out, if Bucky doesn't get on that gun, they'll all die. Good thing Bucky's never been one for compromise, he pulls Duval off the gun platform and onto the floor at his feet. He needs two hands to work the gun, so then he takes off his shoe and presses it against the wound.

It's not perfect, but he can shoot at the Krauts and keep Duval from dying. He keeps his focus on those two things, to think of anything else would be a death sentence.

He doesn't even know if he'll make it back from this mission- how

could anyone possibly make it through 25?

It's a miracle they even make it back between the flak, the bullets, and the fighters. The wind whistles through the bullet holes in the plane and the bullet casings scattered on the floor make his feet slide. He tries not to think about Buck as he holds his hands over Duval's bleeding chest.

They finally land, and Bucky watches as the medics take Duval away. He'd passed out as over the channel and Bucky couldn't wake him up again. He can't bear to think of that kid dying, barely old enough to even be in the military, much less die in it.

The Fort above him is more holes than plane, it's a wonder they didn't just fall out of the sky, that she didn't shake apart the moment they landed. He feels a swell of fondness for her, that poor beat-up B-17, she got them home at least.

He exhales, shaky, "Are they all like that?"

The Major turns to him, hands on his hips, there is nothing behind his eyes, no emotion, "You wondering what to tell your guys?"

Got it in one. How the hell would he explain that to them? He nods dumbly.

"Don’t say anything. They’ll figure it out. We all do."

He bites a corner off his Lucky Deuce and wonders when his eyes will look like the Majors.

He goes on another mission that ends with the other observation plane having to bail out. He only counts three chutes as the flaming plane nosedives. He can't think of what might happen to those men when they hit the ground.

He heard a theory of a cat in a box once, if you don't open the box the cat is both alive and dead. There's no answer until you open the box, at the time he thought it was the stupidest thing he'd ever heard, but now, Bucky wonders if the same is true for humans. If those boys are both alive and dead until the POW exchange.

A bullet cuts the O2 line of their top gunner and he passes out, Bucky almost passes out trying to help him, the mask has slid off his face when he passed out and Bucky has to crawl into the turret to get it

back on him. The turret spins them like a carnival ride and it would almost be funny if they hadn't nearly died, in the end, they both make it, and all Bucky lost was the sleeve of his shirt. He jokes with the kid that he owes him a new shirt, and the kid smiles laughs through his panic, and says he'll buy him a whole factory if he wants it. To Bucky, a shirt sleeve is well worth the price to have saved that kid's life, to make him smile after.

When he gets into interrogation, he bites another corner off of his Lucky Deuce. Two corners two landings. Buck would laugh at him for being superstitious, but he's not gunna chance it.

Buck arrives in three days, he has to get himself straight by then. But for today he just fills up his flask and sits in the jeep at the end of the runway and tries to stop his hands from shaking.

Buck arrives and Bucky tries to revel in his presence, he tries not to think about why he's here, or what could happen to him when he does, finally, get up in the air. He gives him a bike and shows him around the base.

But it's all too soon before he's sitting next to Buck in the mission brief trying not to imagine all the ways that it could go wrong. Buck can tell that something is up, but he doesn't say anything, Bucky is going to have to try harder to hide his nerves in the future.

After the briefing, he all but forces his good luck charm into Buck's hand, fighting to keep the panic he feels out of his voice. He's not sure he succeeds, "I've gone on two missions with it already. I had two wheels down. Look, two corners bitten off. One for each mission. Here I am." He shoves it toward Buck's hand, "Take it."

He wants to say please. He wants to say that this is all the help he can offer, but when Buck raises an eyebrow at him all that comes out is a pitiful, "For luck."

Bucky isn't sure what Buck sees on his face but he takes it and puts it into his coat. "All right."

Bucky stares at Buck until the wagon is out of sight. He prays to something, anything that will listen, "Don't let this be the last time I see him."

The entire time Buck is in the air he feels like a bomb, too many

volatile reactions just barely held apart by a too-thin casing. Red hasn't said anything, so his mask of calm control must be holding up. But it doesn't stop him from thinking about every terrible thing that could happen, the flak, the fighters, mechanical failures. He thinks of all the ways he could lose the man he just got back.

He tries to keep himself busy but it's hard thinking about what could be going on up there. He's in the tower, making the comms guy's life a nightmare. The siren wails and all but tears the binoculars out of Red's hands. Buck's there. Buck's plane is there and he breathes a sigh of relief. The planes come in and he counts- four, five, six...

He slaps Red on the back, hops in the wagon, and speeds to where Buck's plane is parked. He doesn't care what anyone thinks, he's gonna see Buck, he needs to look at him, make sure he's whole and alive.

The men start to pile out of Buck's plane, frantic, every one of them panicked and shaken. Bucky shouts orders, it's the best thing he can do for them right now. Just tell them what to do, that's all they're looking for, some direction after what they experienced. It was what he had wanted after his first mission.

Buck still hasn't come off of his fort and right as Bucky is about to climb into the plane and find him. But Buck drops heavily to the ground, as the jeep screeches to a halt next to him, he's shaken, face pale with a dazed look across his features. Bucky's never seen him like this, and it brings out every protective instinct in his body.

He keeps his voice low and calm, his movements slow as he puts Buck in the Jeep to take him to interrogation. Bucky needs him close. Needs to hear his breathing and hear him talking even if he's pissed that John didn't tell him what it was like.

"I should've been up there with you." Is all Bucky can say, Air Execs rarely fly and he hates it. But it doesn't change the fact that it's the truth, they're a matched set, where one goes the other should too.

Buck looks at his hands, "We have a long road ahead of us."

And it's an unspoken understanding. It's unlikely either of them will make it all the way through this war. Any time one of them isn't up there it's a chance that they'll stay alive.

After interrogation, he takes Buck to see his wounded men. If Buck were in his right mind, it's what he'd want to do, so that's what Bucky makes sure he does. Cut finds him waiting in the Jeep- he knows the

injured don't want an audience and Buck wouldn't want anyone to think he needed a nursemaid- and asks him to come drinking with the men tonight. He agrees, he could use a drink, and the men could use a drink. They need the opportunity to decompress, to let loose, and be supported by their fellow airmen. But he's also worried about Buck, and he'll only go if Bucky is sure Buck's okay.

When Buck exits the sick bay, he seems more together than he'd been before he'd seen his men. Buck had always been a master of putting on a brave face for his crew, but Bucky knew better. The mask starts to slip the moment he's in the Jeep, so Bucky just shoves a warm cup of coffee in his hand and drives them to the end of the runway.

The tarmac is empty now. The planes from today's mission have been stowed, or taken into the repair shop. The Brits aren't flying tonight so there's no chance of them having to move. It would give them the time and space Buck needed.

He'd promised Curt they'd go drinking, and he still might, but he would stay here until Buck told him what to do. He'd sit in this jeep until they both turned to stone, until their bones were nothing but dust in the rusted carcass of this wagon. All if Buck asked him to.

Bucky turns off the ignition and sits in silence as Buck takes a small sip of the coffee in his hand, humming in contentment. Dollop of milk, no sugar. He's never really sure what Buck needs, even to him Buck is still sometimes a mystery, but he at least knows how he likes his coffee, when he needs space. And that's something.

Right now, Buck needs to be alone. Needs time and quiet to process what he'd just been through. But Bucky knows that Buck won't take the space he needs, feels like it's too selfish to go off on his own. So the one thing he can do is make sure Buck can't be bothered by the other men and can't be looked on to lead them. Buck will make sure he's safe to do whatever he needs.

It's lucky for John that Buck's definition of 'space' didn't seem to apply to him. Even when Buck was like this, he never told him to go away, he was always the exception to the rule. It was a fact he kept close when his self-doubt threatened to take him down a peg.

The sun is sinking below the horizon, and he wishes there was a beautiful rosy sunset, but the thick gray clouds just get darker until they sit in complete blackness. Buck clears his throat and sets the now empty mug on the dashboard.

"I'm sorry," Bucky whispers, at last. "I'm sorry I didn't say anything."

Buck hums in acknowledgment and leans his head against the back of his seat. The sky is starting to clear, clusters of stars peaking out from behind the cloud cover.

After a long silence, "Do y'think we'll ever make it to the stars, Bucky?"

For a moment Bucky basks again in the sound of Buck's steady, deep voice. If Buck was mad at him before, he's been forgiven now, and he basks in that too.

Turning to Buck, taking in Buck's profile, his little sharp nose, the small upturn at the corner of his lips, "20,000 feet not good enough for you, Buck?"

Rolling his head to the side, Buck's smile slowly spreads across his face, "You don't want to?"

Bucky smiles back, "Only if you're flying."

The smile slides off Buck's face, "30 men." His voice catches, "I lost 30 men and we didn't drop a single bomb. What a waste."

Bucky's heart breaks, "I know, Buck."

Without really thinking about it, Bucky puts his hand on top of Buck's and squeezes. Buck looks down at their hands and turns his palm up to squeeze back.

John's heart speeds up, but then Buck pulls his hand away, "I'm tired, Bucky."

Bucky clears his throat and he restarts the car. What a stupid asshole he is, he can't even be normal when his friend needs it most. He whips the car around and takes Buck back to the bunks.

After he drops Buck off, he goes out with Curt and the boys he gets drunk off his ass.

Adams. Schmalenbach. Petrich.

30 men lost. He should *feel* something. He should feel the bone-deep sadness of those lost souls. The desperation to never go up again. But he doesn't. There's only elation. Elation that Buck came back. Came back to *him*.

It's wrong, he knows it is. He thought the booze might soften him up, thought that the stories of the shocked men next to him might do it, but in the end, the relief of getting Buck back trumped it all.

He climbs up on the wing of a plane and brings his bottle with him, Curt follows like a Nanny dog following an accident-prone child. Curt does this, he keeps an eye on Bucky when he doesn't even deserve it. Just another one of his friends he isn't good enough for.

Adams. Schmalenbach. Petrich.

"You good?" Curt asks the question so quietly that if John wants to pretend he never heard it, he can. Curt always knows the line to walk with him.

Bucky would put these types of feelings on Buck, but he feels a connection with Curt. Curt *understands* him. There's the same false bravado in both of them, they recognize it in each other and they know when it's fragile.

So against his better judgment, he asks, "Do you feel anything? Huh?" Curt's mouth twists. "Do you feel anything?"

Curt wrings his hands and hums, "Yeah. I miss those guys."

The response is vulnerable, Curt's hoping Bucky will be the same, but he can't stop moving, there's an irritation that is right under his skin that keeps him from opening up, "Because me? I don't- I don't feel a thing."

But he *wants* to feel something, he knows he should, so he goads Curt into punching him. And the moment Curt's fist connects, that elation, that relief he felt at Buck's return, bleeds away. *There* is the pain he should be feeling. The loss of the men.

Bucky hisses and holds the side of his face, it hurts to smile, so he does it anyway, "I felt that, Curt. I felt that."

He tries to dwell on it, the grief, the pain, but it all goes away again when he walks into the barracks and sees Buck peacefully asleep, mouth slightly parted. He tries to get a few hours of sleep before he meets the new CO, and he falls asleep counting Buck's eyelashes.

When he wakes up Buck is gone and the bed's cold, it's been some time since Buck left.

He second-guesses his decision to get a few hours of sleep, he should have just stayed up. If he had, maybe he wouldn't feel like run-over shit now. It's still too early to head over to the Colonel's office, so he showers up and changes his clothes. He may still be drunk but at least he doesn't smell like he is anymore.

The new CO doesn't seem to mind that he turns up drunk, even seems to get a kick out of it. He likes the new CO, he's a guy who values skill over rules. That being said, it doesn't stop him from getting demoted, and honestly? He's happy about it, happy to be in the air again.

What he is surprised about is that after Huglin, he wasn't kicked out altogether, but then he sees the letter from Buck on the Colonel's desk. And it clicks, he knows it's the only reason he didn't get kicked out entirely. When Buck wanted to, he could convince anyone into anything, he didn't want to often, and Bucky feels all the more touched that he'd done it for him.

At breakfast, he breaks the news of his demotion and Buck tries to look nonchalant, but Bucky can tell by the way the Buck won't meet his eyes that he's hiding something. He even knows what it is.

"Oh, I can read upside down, Buck."

Buck gives up the ghost with a sigh, "All I said was the army was right about you being a leader. That you lead best as squadron commander. You don't got to send me any flowers."

But Bucky thinks he might anyway. Buck didn't need to go through the trouble to get him out of a mess he created, didn't have to go through the trouble to talk to the new CO in the early hours of the morning to get him the position he'd wanted in the first place. Not many people in Bucky's life ever just *did* things for him without wanting something in return. Buck was the first person to give without ever expecting anything, Hell, most of the time Buck would only admit he'd done something selfless under pain of death.

It was something he loved about Buck; he would give every ounce of himself to the people he cared about. But it was also something that made Bucky worry about how much of himself he was giving away.

Bucky sits back in his chair, "I did make one last request before being demoted."

"Hmm?" Buck finally looks at him again, stabbing his pancakes like it might make them more palatable.

"I want to write the letters to the families of the boys we lost." He exhales sharply, now for some reason, with Buck's soft eyes on him, he feels it, the loss of his men, maybe Buck is the only one he'll let himself feel vulnerable with, and his throat constricts, "I think it would be better coming from-" His throat catches, "-from me, not someone they never met."

Buck holds his eyes, "I'll help you."

Bucky clears his throat, "I'd appreciate that."

It wasn't his goal to rope Buck into helping him write the letters home, it was just another way that Buck gives without being asked.

Those damned blue eyes keep holding his and don't look away, and for a moment he forgets himself. Forgets he's supposed to keep his distance, so he leans forward, he just wants to be closer. But he has been forgetting a lot around Buck lately, but Buck hasn't forgotten, he leans back with practiced ease, keeping an appropriate distance between them.

Bucky's used to it, so without missing a beat, "Ya know if this whole thing ended, and there were only two pilots left in the air, it'd be me and it'd be you, Buck."

"Don't count on it," There's a ghost of a smile on Buck's face as he says it. It's a worn joke, but Bucky loves it just the same.

What he doesn't say is; that if there was only one pilot, he'd make sure it was Buck.

Buck shifts, reaching into his pocket and holds up Bucky's two-dollar bill between his fingers, "Since you gon' be flying again, you'll be needed this back."

Bucky just waves him off, "Naw, Buck, you keep it." He smiles his biggest, shit-eating-est grin, "It'll be your good luck charm. And now that you're coming up with me, you'll be mine."

The eye roll he receives from Buck is familiar, as much Buck wants to seem exasperated, Bucky can see the smile pull at the corner of his lips.

The boys keep themselves busy, they go to the pub whenever they can to try to keep their morale up. Buck even comes along. All of them

become closer, bumping shoulders and slinging arms around one another, almost as if to confirm the other is really alive, or that they are.

And Buck slowly stops keeping his distance from Bucky. He lets Bucky keep his arm around him, sits pressed up to the side of him in the pub, and stands shoulder-to-shoulder with him in the officers' club. He's glad, he'd missed his friend. The companionable touches were a small comfort in a world where you'd joke with a man one minute and lose him the next.

After the night they'd spent together, there had been this uncrossable distance between them, it had kept them both safe. They had both retracted into themselves, pushing down whatever the hell happened that night. For Buck, it was just a stupid mistake, for John, well- it didn't matter what it was. He knows nothing like that is ever gonna happen again.

Now though, Bucky's about to win a bike race against Buck but the air raid sirens go off, cutting the race short. So he's caught half on top of Buck, clutching his sleeve in the pile of bikes and men he's under.

"All right, let’s head for the shelters," Jack starts to shoo them out.

Instead of doing what they're told, they all file outside to watch the bombs crash down on Norwich.

Buck is unexpectedly somber, usually, he puts up a front, but the men are far enough away, and they're huddled close enough for Buck to feel comfortable airing some of his uneasiness, "Some poor bastards are getting it handed to ’em. We could be next."

Whenever Gale is low, Bucky is ready to bring him back up, "Oh, we’re getting through this."

Buck throws him a wry grin, "Says the gambler."

"Well, if I’m gonna bet on anything, I’m gonna bet on us, Buck." It's the truth. He'd meant it when he said they would be the last two planes in the sky, he meant it now. Nothing could stop them when they were together, he would believe it enough for both of them if he had to.

"You sound like my dad, John."

Buck had never talked about his father, not once. Always changed the

subject when it got brought up, so Bucky just puts his fist on his cheek and watches him, waiting for him to continue, or not.

"My father liked to drink," Buck whispers, and if they were any further apart, his words would be covered by the popping crackle of the flak. "When he drank, he gambled. I can't tell you the amount of nights I spent sleeping on benches in Casper's parlors and pony tracks." Buck lets out a mirthless laugh, "Didn't matter if it was a ball game, horse, dog, game of cards, he'd bet. He'd usually lose."

It's not a flattering comparison, but Bucky takes this for what it is. Buck trusts him enough to tell him about his father at all, and there's merit in that. He doesn't say a word, he just hums in acknowledgment. This moment seems fragile, like they're the only two people in the world and he won't do anything to break that.

"But he kept doing it," Buck turns away from the flak and his eyes are unusually intense when they meet his, Bucky stops breathing, "He'd always tell me when his luck was down, 'Gale, this time I can feel it.'." He turns away again, "Was always looking for the shortcut."

"Buck." Bucky doesn't know what to say so he just says Buck's name, he needs to meet his eyes again, "Buck."

When they do finally lock eyes again, he loses his resolve and makes a joke, "That's why you don't like sports."

The joke lands flat, but there is the ghost of a smile in Buck's eyes as he looks to the sky again, "That RAF prick was right. These daylight missions, they're suicide.'

Bucky still wishes he could have watched Buck put that man on his ass, "Then why didn't you agree with him?"

"Didn't like his delivery."

Bucky drops his head to hide his fond smile, even Buck isn't perfect sometimes and he relishes it, "Huh. Well, if you aren't a betting man, what's the move?"

"We lead our boys through it."

Buck says it like it's the most obvious thing in the world, and to him, it might be. Bucky can't do anything but agree, "We do."

They fall silent and the flak continues and Bucky just watches the light

of the flicker over Buck's face.

And they do lead their boys through it. There isn't a mission that they don't put the boys back together after, not a man who breaks down that they don't comfort. As leaders, it's their job, but more than that, they owe it to all these men who follow them without question, who take their orders as if they were handed down by God himself.

After a few months, the raids start to blur together, the faces of people he knows become fewer, and the number of letters he writes to the parents and wives make his hands cramp.

They're losing too many. He takes care of the replacements, they don't deserve any less, but it's heartbreaking to see their starting lineup be reduced to almost nothing.

Things between him and Buck are back to normal, not just *normal* normal, but actually back to how they were before Bucky fucked everything up by sleeping with his best friend.

Though in that time, he's learned a few new things to help keep his sanity. For one, he's learned to at least look away from that damned smitten look Buck gets when he gets a letter from Marge and to make himself scarce when Buck reads it. For another, that if he can throw himself at enough girls in the pub, in the Officers Club, they can dance, they can fuck, and it fills some of that empty space that Buck left behind.

It's all back to normal. Normal. Normal. Normal.

But then there's the North Africa mission, and it's hell.

It's the worst mission they've been on so far, and that's saying something. Curt goes down, he can only hope that crazy bastard got out okay. And when they lose the back gunner on his plane, he hops on a gun and takes out as many Krauts as he can. Every plane he downs is one less that can take out one of his men. One less that could take out Buck.

Buck's plane is hit, it's lagging and Bucky is asking for updates every moment he can. He can't lose Buck. He feels like Orpheus calling back for Eurydice, they're walking through hell together and Africa is the exit of the underworld, they just had to reach it.

After he lands, Bucky won't take his eyes off the horizon, he won't be

like that Greek idiot, his mistake was taking his eyes off the thing he loved in the first place. Bucky would watch for Buck for as long as it took him to get here, it didn't matter how long. Luckily for him, Buck's plane comes into view only a few moments after he lands.

"It's beat to shit, how's he flying that thing?"

"He's too low, I don't know if he'll make it."

The men chatter around him, but he knows Buck will make it as long as he can see him. And Buck does make it, barely, he misses the runway, but he made it. When Bucky gets a good look at the plane he realizes just how much of a feat that truly was.

There are cheers from the men when Buck lands, "No engine Cleven!"

Bucky clasps Jack on the shoulder, he knew Buck would make it. He couldn't believe otherwise.

Jack barely makes it into the wagon before John speeds off to meet Buck's plane, "Jesus Christ, Egan!"

John doesn't pay Jack any mind, he needs to see Buck. He did his part, kept his end of the deal, and Buck sure as shit better be there.

Buck drops out of the plane and Bucky feels like he breathing for the first time since he heard Buck's plane got hit. The Jeep barely comes to a stop before Bucky is out of it. When he gets closer he can tell by the glassiness of Gale's eyes he's shell-shocked.

Buck needs a minute, so Bucky busies himself with the rest of the crew. Kidd's giving orders in the background, and Bucky slowly approaches Gale, making sure not to startle him.

He defaults to a joke, they hardly ever have the intended effect, but Bucky's not a quitter, "I don’t know how you flew that thing all the way to Africa, but you couldn’t make the runway." He tries to get Buck's attention by motioning to the runway, "It’s right there. Huh?"

Buck just stares ahead, then he sees the body come off Buck's plane.

"Oh boy, who is it?"

The question seems to snap Buck out of his haze, "Norman Smith. Radio operator." He pauses, inhaling deep, "I lost four forts."

"I know."

"How many of us made it?" Buck asks like he doesn't really want to know the answer.

Buck won't tolerate anything but the truth so he tells Buck about the losses and sees the hope go out of his eyes. He tries to convince Buck Curt is okay, he tries to convince himself.

"We’re gonna get through this. Come on. Don’t you stop believing that." If Buck doesn't have hope, Bucky will have enough for both of them.

"Sure, Bucky."

Buck starts to walk away in a daze, and Bucky follows. They watch the sunset until it sinks below the mountains and leaves them in darkness. Bucky knows that Buck needs time, needs space, but Bucky won't let him go without looking at those wounds on his face. He wraps his arms around Buck's shoulders and he feels the tension bleeds out of them, "C'mon Buck, I'll clean you up."

The boys found what they could and were building a small fire. Many were just looking for something to do, anything to take their minds off the carnage and loss they'd just experienced, and without the sun the night was becoming cold.

The wagons from the 12th picked up the injured, but they would be here a few days while they gathered the gear to get them and their forts back to their base for refueling and repairs. They could rough it for a few days, maybe they could even take a detour to the ocean.

Buck follows Bucky's gentle herding until he sets him on a crate on the edge of the firelight, "You stay here, Buck. Alright? I'll be right back."

Buck nods, not really seeing, not really hearing.

John rummages through the provisions until finds a powdered drink mix, a mug, a blanket, and a first aid kit. He mixes up the drink and returns to Buck pushing the sugary drink into his hands, "Drink this."

Buck puts it to his lips automatically, winching at the taste.

There's blood down the side of Buck's face, Bucky needs to look at the wounds and check if he has a concussion. John takes the drink from his hand puts it down, and tries to keep him talking, "Sorry couldn't see the flavor, what did I end up picking?"

He unbuckles and removes Buck's flight gear and takes off his jacket while he lets Buck's brain process the question.

"Lemon." He answers finally.

The shrapnel seems limited to his face so he throws the blanket around Buck's shoulders and shoves the tin cup back into his hands, "Aw Buck, that's the best flavor."

Buck takes another sip staring deep into the cup, "Yeah, I guess so."

Taking the lighter from his pocket, Bucky flicks it on, "Hey Buck, keep looking at me alright?" He shines the light at the edges of Buck's eyes and watches them contract like they should, at least there's no head injury.

Bucky starts to clean the wounds on Buck's face, gently pushing his hair back dabbing his face with iodine, wiping the residue of steering fluid off his face. The wounds are superficial, and probably won't even scar, so as Bucky cleans the wounds he takes the opportunity to just look at Buck. Memorizing the splay of Buck's eyelashes, the bow of his lips, he'd always looked more like a movie star than a pilot, and now was no different.

Cleaned up the wounds don't look as bad, Bucky wraps his hand around the back of Buck's neck, thumb resting along his ear, making him meet his eyes, "Well Buck, I hate to be the one to tell you this, but you'll be just as ugly when you're all healed up."

That full mouth curves into the beginning of a smile. There, finally, his Buck is returning. He lets out a raspy laugh, "Thanks, Bucky."

"Good thing Marge has a soft spot for this ugly mug of yours." He hopes it doesn't sound forced, but mentions of Marge are usually a surefire way to cheer Buck up. He'd suffer through that damned goofy grin if it brought Buck back to himself.

But the plan backfires and the smile falls from Buck's face. He looks serious staring into Bucky's eyes, like he's looking for something.

"And what about you?" he says finally. His gaze doesn't waver.

Bucky clenches his jaw, he doesn't have it in him to lie, not after today, "You know I do, Buck. You know I do."

He's not sure what Buck finds in his eyes, but he's too scared to stay

and find out.

Glen Dye hits his 25 and the boys are celebrating. The newbies look around with their wide eyes taking in the older crews, the dames, and the band. It must seem like a hell of a welcome.

But the older pilots know it's a hell of a wake.

It's great that one of them gets to go home, but the odds are against them all and Dye is a reminder of that. The odds keep getting slimmer, fewer and fewer of them come back from every mission. 25 missions seem impossible, even at 20, Bucky's not sure he'll make it.

Every time Buck goes up the black hole swirling around Bucky's feet gets deeper, but Bucky fights it, if he falls he's done. It doesn't matter if Buck goes up alone or with him, every mission is another chance of losing him. They've already beaten the odds, he's not sure how much longer their luck will hold out.

Colonel Harding strolls over, already in his cups, and proposes the dumbest goddamn mission he's ever heard. Ending this war by sending planes to Berlin, tonight. He knows it's bluster, but it still pisses him off. Maybe he's in his cups too, but he calls him on it.

The men go silent. He can feel Buck tense beside him, staring a hole into the side of his face, ready to step in and de-escalate the situation, ready to save Bucky's ass again.

But Bucky is ready to fight. How *dare* Harding joke about a dumbshit raid like that, how dare we talk about sending the men on a suicide mission, about sending *Buck* on a suicide mission. Maybe Harding sees the seriousness in his eyes, maybe he thinks Bucky's joking, but he pivots and laughs, walking away and talking about all the 'single fillies'.

The group dissipates and it's just him and Buck left at the bar.

Buck sighs, either in resignation or relief, Bucky can't tell, "You need a break. I think the Colonel ought to fix you up a weekend pass."

He's not wrong, but Bucky doesn't want to go. But he gets the feeling that Buck will get the Colonel to put him on leave, regardless of whether he wants it or not.

So if he is going to get a weekend pass, the least he can do is try to get

Buck to go with him. They could do all the things Buck would want to do- Museums, sightseeing, the whole nine. And at night they could grab a drink at a pub with good music and good whiskey. It's a dumb fantasy, but it doesn't stop him from wanting it.

"Mmm," Bucky considers his glass, "You should come. London. Let's do it up, Buck. Paint the town red."

It's a dangerous thing he's asking for and he knows it. It doesn't stop him from wanting Buck to say 'yes'.

"Yeah, maybe next time."

He knew it was coming, but Buck's response was still a shot through the heart. Even still, Bucky can't help but smile when Buck picks up Meatball and starts to dance.

It's in the little moments like these that John can almost forget there's a war on. When Buck smiles and winks at him his chest constricts, making him choke on feelings he knows won't ever be returned. As if it were even possible, he falls in love just a little bit more as he watches Buck sway on the dance floor.

He's not sure he's ever really known what love is, but right now, watching Buck dance, he thinks he might finally understand. And if this feeling isn't love, well, he wouldn't bother taking a chance on it.

He goes to London and he meets a girl, Paulina, with dark blond curls, piercing blue eyes, and full, plush lips. She could be Buck's sister.

That has (almost) nothing to do with why he takes her out to dance and back to his hotel.

Bucky *likes* her, and he hasn't liked someone in a long time. Paulina is straightforward and he knows where he stands with her. She likes to dance, and she likes to drink, and she feels good under his hands and he likes the way her long nails feel on his back and in his hair. They make each other feel good and that's all they both want. It's simple. He likes simple.

The next morning he asks her to stay. He asks *Paulina* to stay. Maybe she's 'a girl worth writing to' as Buck would say. Maybe they could both find comfort in each other since love seems to be off the table for both of them.

But she doesn't stay. They both know they were a replacement for the one they couldn't have. No reason to make it more than that.

Before she leaves, she places a soft kiss on his forehead and calls him 'Sweet Man'. The kiss breaks his heart a little, that seems to be happening more and more for a guy who used to feel nothing.

When she pauses at the door, he stupidly feels hope that she might come back, might spend the day with him. She leaves anyway and that stupid glimmer of hope makes him feel that much worse as the door clicks shut. He allows himself to wallow for a bit that morning. It's not something he usually allows himself to do. He'd learned at a young age that if he lets himself get too deep he risks never getting back out.

But today, in the afternoon light, he dips a foot into the swirling abyss beneath him and lets himself wonder if it's something fundamental about himself that makes him so easy to leave.

He grabs a quick lunch in the dining room downstairs. Some sort of meat pie, that goes well with coffee and helps soak up the alcohol. He feels a little better, full, caffeinated, and ready to wreck himself again.

It's a sunny day, perfect weather, not too breezy or cold or warm. And Bucky smiles at his luck. He asks a woman where he can get a paper, he knows there was a mission yesterday, there should be something in the papers about it, and she points him down the street.

But then there is a heartbreaking scream, in a bombed-out building, a man holds the limp body of a little girl. Her mother is screaming fighting against the men holding her. He thinks about the conversation he had last night with Paulina. She had asked him if it ever weighed on his conscience. It did. All of it did. Even if the Germans deserved every bomb he dropped, he wasn't sure any more mothers deserved to lose any more children.

He can't watch anymore, and he heads in the direction of the newspaper stand and sees the headline.

Eighth Air Force Smashes Bremen

It brings a smile to his face that the mission went well. But it's short-lived, when he has the paper in hand and sees:

30 Bombers Lost.

Buck.

The next moments are a blur, he rushes to the nearest phone booth and gets Red on the phone, he won't let himself feel it until he knows.

Red tells him that Buck went down swinging. Most of the starting lineup did.

There is a ringing in his ears after he slams the phone back on the hook.

Buck went down.

Buck went down.

He thinks about the cat in the box again, that Buck is sitting in some middle space between life and death because Bucky can't see him. It's a load of shit.

Buck went down.

Buck was alive. If Bucky let himself believe otherwise, he'd never be able to do anything ever again. Buck was his last connection to anything, *anyone*, worth fighting for. In this whole world, Buck was the only one who made making it through this war seem worth it.

Buck went down.

He loses time between the phone booth and the train. One moment he's in a phone booth, then next he is on a train headed to Thorpe Abbotts. It doesn't really matter as long as he gets back.

Buck went down.

When he gets back, he gets drunk. He can't let himself feel it. If he lets himself feel Buck's loss he'll never recover, the darkness that's been threatening to swallow him will eat him whole.

Chapter End Notes

> If I had a nickel for every time I was obsessed with a man who fought in WW2 named Bucky I'd have two nickels, which isn't a lot but it's weird that it happened twice.
>
> Yell at me on tumblr if you feel so inclined Here

Capture

Chapter Summary

Bucky's plane goes down, it's worse than he thought it'd be.

Chapter Notes

JFC so I originally had this as ONE chapter but it was almost 12k words which just seemed like a lot for one chapter so I split it up. Good news for y'all though, is that I'm posting BOTH chapters in pretty quick succession. If I don't get the other chapter up today I'll likely get it posted tomorrow, I think they're still better read together than apart.

So at one point in this chapter, I thought 'I'm making Bucky too obsessed with Gale, he probably thinking about other things sometimes right?' But then I went back and rewatched these episodes, and no. No, he does not.

Warning for suicidal ideation in this chapter, it's not too heavy, I don't think it's any more than what's in the show, but I wanted to throw the warning out just in cases.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He hadn't planned on getting downed. He wasn't that selfish, the other men on his crew weren't a part of his suicide run. He had done his best, at least most of them parachuted to the ground. And if he made it to the ground, then so did his men. Then so did Buck.

Buck had to have. Bucky had to *believe* he had.

Hiding his chute is easier than he thought, he even manages to steal a cabbage before finding a secluded spot to hide. He spends the night among the twisted gnarled roots of an Ash tree, flinching and starting at every gust of wind and rustle of leaves.

It's been two days since he crashed, and now he's not sure what to do, the Air Force never trained him to hide in enemy territory. Hell, they never trained him to use his chute either, but he hopes he can figure this out too.

In hindsight, he does the exact wrong thing, he follows the road. At the time it makes sense, if he can figure out where he is, he can figure

out which way to go, and how to get back to friendly territory, but he's quickly spotted by some kids and then everything goes to hell.

He points his gun at the kids who spot him but can't bring himself to shoot anyone, dropping bombs and looking someone in the eye as you pull the trigger are different enough that he just can't. Even if he could, he could never shoot a kid. He's captured and he doesn't resist. He just waits, wet and cold, for the German farmer to hand him over to the Nazis.

A shocking number of Nazi soldiers speak English, but even so, they don't tell him much. The train they put him on reminds him of some of the trains in London, if it weren't for the guns, the Nazis, and the low thrum of fear in his belly, he might almost enjoy the ride. He's been put on with four other soldiers from the 381st, one's injured, so he doesn't like the odds of them escaping, but he'll keep an eye out for an opportunity.

When the train finally lurches to a stop, the guards march them into a demolished town. The buildings are on fire and the thick smoke almost makes him choke. People are sorting through piles of rubble that used to be buildings. It reminds him of London just a few days ago, the woman crying over the body of her daughter. It strikes him just how much, in the end, the war treats civilians the same. Ruins their lives without a single thought. After Buck went down, he'd convinced himself that the Germans deserved their bombs, but now that resolve is wavering. Seeing the destruction the night bombings caused, Bucky was glad for the daylight raids, at least they tried to hit their targets, at least they tried to avoid this.

This town was of no strategic importance. It was just here, and these people got killed anyway.

This place is a nightmare, this place is every version of hell he'd ever learned about in Sunday school. Fire, and wailing, and brimstone. Gaunt, stricken faces staring at them as they travel through the town. He's Dante walking through the fifth circle of hell, wondering when the wrath of these people will be turned on him. He doesn't have to wait long.

The faces go from shock to anger to fury, the townspeople start screaming and yelling at them, throwing rubble and bricks. The crowd gathers around them, pressing ever closer on them, shoving them, clawing at their clothes and faces. They grow more violent, more incensed, every calming effort any of them make just seems to make it

worse. These people want to kill them, and he's not sure he blames them.

A man lunges at him with a knife and he dodges it, just barely, only to be hit on the back and knocked to his knees, a bottle smashes over his head. He can't get up, he can't see, his limbs aren't listening to him anymore. He hears one gunshot, then another, then two more, each followed by a heavy thud. The crowd cheers.

Maybe this is what he deserves for thinking it didn't matter if they hit civilians. This is what he deserves for all the death he's reigned down from the sky. There were five of them to start, he's the only one left. A Mauser holds ten bullets, a Luger eight, it doesn't really matter the type of gun, there will still be plenty of bullets left for him.

So this is it, he thinks, this is how he dies.

He keeps his eyes on the ground, he doesn't want to see it coming. Other men might want to die on their feet, die looking into the eye of their murderer, but not him. Death is coming for him one way or another and he doesn't want the last face he sees to be that of a stranger.

Instead, he tries to think of Buck: How his lips felt against his all those months ago, how the dimple above his lip stands out when he smirks at him, the light of the flak flickering off his face that night on base. He tries to remember every detail, every moment. He wants his last thoughts to be of Gale, and fuck it if that makes him wrong, he'll settle up with God when he gets there.

There's an empty click and then another, somehow, by some miracle, the gun is empty. Bucky finally looks over, the last thing he feels is a strike to the side of his face, and the world goes dark.

Someone's muttering next to him, words slurring together.

Some of the boys talk in their sleep, some of them scream, but this feels different somehow. He's trying to wake up to see who it is, to see if they need to be woken up, but it feels like he's fighting to do it. He's freezing, his head hurts, and he doesn't even remember drinking that much last night.

Then he hears someone speak in German and he knows where he is. He remembers, with no small amount of terror, what went on. Everything starts to crystallize around him. The man piled on top

of him is praying. Delirious. He can feel the cold stiff corpses around him. "Shut up," he whispers, they might be able to get out of this but the other man needs to be quiet, "Hey, shut up."

The wagon stops and Bucky plays dead, it's not hard, he feels a breath away from it anyway. The poor bastard next to him keeps muttering the lord's prayer like it'll help him. He hears someone get down, and then a loud thwack.

He does his best not to flinch as the blood splatters his face. The other man gets off the wagon and the voices start to fade out.

This is his chance.

He rolls off the wagon and starts to run in the opposite direction of the voices, it's more of a propelled fall forward, but he doesn't hear the men coming after him. He runs as fast as he can, as deep into the woods as he can.

He falls and he gets back up.

His head is reeling; running is making his head throb. But he keeps going. He can't stop. If they catch him they'll kill him.

He falls and he gets back up.

He clutches at the trees for support, using them to push himself forward.

He falls and-

Something is poking him in the back. He just wants to sleep, he's so tired, but it doesn't stop. He finally turns his head, more Germans. Great.

He doesn't even remember passing out, but there are leaves and dirt stuck to his face. The soldiers try to stand him up and he vomits, remnants of cabbage spilling over their shoes. He's surprised they don't drop him back to the ground or shoot him, but they just drag him over to a car that seems too nice for transporting prisoners and shove him inside.

When the door closes he falls against it and the darkness welcomes him.

He wakes again and they're driving. There is an officer next to him,

the man looks over him like taking a car ride with an American isn't out of the ordinary, hell, maybe it isn't, "Major, you are safe, we are taking you to Dulag Luft."

Bucky doesn't answer, he laughs, a hollowed-out sound that shakes free from his chest and passes out against the door again.

When they reach Dulag Luft, they search him, clean his wounds, and then throw him into a dreary cell. It's cold, there's only a thin blanket, but he curls up in it anyway and passes out.

He's awoken by the sound of metal against metal, a scraping, then a slam. When he looks up there is a tray of food by the door of the door. Some sort of brown slop with a few chunks of potatoes and a small hunk of dark bread.

His stomach turns, but he needs to eat, even if his body doesn't think it wants to. So he picks up of tray of lukewarm food, moving the stew around the metal tray with his spoon, the smell turns his stomach. He eats slowly, choking down each bit and pausing to make sure it stays down. It's not good food, but it's not bad either. Once some of the food has settled in his stomach, he's able to eat with more zeal, like his body finally remembered it hadn't eaten in two days and needed to.

There are a few more days like that. He sleeps, he shivers, and he eats the paltry stew they get served for every meal. He feels less dizzy by the day, but his headaches persist, his brow bone and a few ribs must be broken.

Then one day, the door opens and he's escorted by the guards to an office where a young man is sitting at the desk. The kid smiles at him as if they are old friends, he looks like a kid sitting at his father's desk. It strikes Bucky as funny, he almost wants to make a joke of it, but he just plops down in the chair without much grace.

The man, more boy really, is friendly, congenial in a way that makes you want to answer his questions and have a conversation with him. And for a moment, Bucky almost feels bad for taking his whiskey when he'll be giving him nothing in return.

But then he starts telling him information about his life.

"Married? From what I hear definitely not."

He almost clenches his jaw, almost. But he just meets the kid's eyes. They're cold, like a shark's, looking for weakness, for any tell. He can't

break.

He takes a cigarette.

"Was Buck Cleven a Yankees fan?"

John's blood runs cold. He keeps quiet but the interrogator keeps on.

"No? yes?" He pauses and sighs, changing tactics. The interrogator knows he's hit a nerve and keeps on, "I hear he was quite a flyer. I read of his exploits in the Regensburg attack. He was your-" the interrogator looks up at him, "*friend*, wasn't he?"

Bucky hears the insinuation, but he can't react. He can give away a damn thing. This kid is asking questions like he already knows the answers. He *does* know the answers. How the hell does he?

"I'd like to talk to you about Buck Cleven, John. But I'd like you to talk to me as well."

Buck.

There is a noise, high-pitched, ringing through his ears. He almost tells him what he wants to know. Just to know what happened to Buck. It's just the number of replacements, he probably already knows anyway. He knows everything else. It almost makes him break.

Almost.

"John Egan. Major. O-399510."

After a few more days in his cell, they release all the prisoners into the main hall and usher them to the train yard. There's not enough time to talk, but he sees that most of them are airmen. They load him and the other prisoners onto a train, pushed in like chattel. He knows these boys are scared, so he puts on a brave face and pulls his men up. It's what Buck would have done.

Then he hears the other train, he thinks it's another train full of soldiers, but it's not. It's full of women, pale arms reaching, reaching, *reaching* out for help. Crying and screaming. The desperation he sees on their faces puts a fear in him he's never felt. He had heard about the Germans rounding people up, but it was another thing to see it.

There's are shot and he freezes.

For a moment he wonders who's shot, if *he* is shot, but then he sees the soldier lying dead on the ground, trying to escape. Fear and panic start to rise up in him again, he wants to run, but he pushes it all back down with every bit of strength he has left. He can't react to it, he can't feel it, not yet.

He pulls the rest of the men into the train car.

They load the body in the train car with them. The men in the car are silent as the door closes, then one of the men falls to his knees and screams as the train starts to move. Bucky can't help him, if he moves he'll break. The man is alive, his friend is dead, and that's the best the situation can offer him.

Not yet.

It's the only mantra that's getting him through. He can't feel it, he can't let himself, not yet.

He doesn't know how long they're on the train, but it's long enough that his legs ache from standing, and his head swims.

The train finally pitches to a stop, unbalancing the men in the car, and throwing them all against one another. The lights are too bright when the train car door slides open, and the Germans are yelling, ugly snarled faces, as they're herded off the train. Their dogs bark and snap, one wrong step in any direction could be the end of them. He helps the men off the train and helps the man who screamed earlier stay upright as they walk past the guards.

He feels himself slipping, the hole around his feet is getting bigger. It's not a hole anymore. It's a chasm, an abyss, if he feels anything, he'll feel it all, he'll be swallowed up. *Not yet*, he clings to the words like the only port in a storm.

Five dead since he hit the ground and he's barely hanging on, he's slipping. *Not yet.* At the beginning of the war, he couldn't feel anything, now it's taking everything in him to keep his feelings in check. But he wasn't the man he was at the beginning of this war, he never would be that man again.

Spots are starting to form in front of his eyes, he can't help anymore, so he pats the man he'd been helping on the back, "You okay?"

The man stumbles forward raising his hand in thanks.

They reach a corridor of barbed wire fencing, people are shouting, asking about their friends, but it's just noise to him.

But then he hears *his* name and a surge of adrenaline rushes through him, he feels better than he has in days.

"Bucky!"

His men are calling his name.

"Crank! Murph! Glen!" He feels himself claw back up. If they made it, Buck could have too, "Hey! Any of you know if Buck made it?"

"What?"

"I said if Buck…"

"John Egan! Your 2:00."

John turns and he's met with the most beautiful thing he's ever seen. Buck. Alive and smiling at him. He takes a deep breath for what feels like the first time since Buck went down.

"What took you so long?" Buck doesn't even bother to hide his smile and neither does Bucky. He almost stops. He almost goes over to the fence, just to make sure he's real. Buck pins him with a significant look, "I'll meet you inside.

It's a promise, telling him he just has to make it a little longer. Relief washes over him and he feels his eyes well up. Shit. He let himself feel something. He clenches his jaw and pushes it back down. But Buck is still giving him that soft smile and Buck has always been his weakness.

*

When he comes out of processing Buck and his men are waiting for him, just as he said he would. Buck's arms are around him as soon as he makes it down the steps, pulling him into a fierce hug, the others are pressing into them.

All at once, John feels like he can't hold himself up anymore, he's slipping. So instead of falling into despair, he falls into Buck, and Buck holds him up. He buries his face into Buck's neck and breathes deep, there's no sign of Buck's signature aftershave, but he almost likes this better, just soap and sweat and *Buck*.

The guards yell something at the group in German which probably means something like 'move along' and they start to disperse. Buck pulls away just enough to let them walk, but he stays close enough to make sure Bucky stays standing.

Bucky's body feels like it's shutting down, he can feel his head throb and his chest aches at every breath. He'd heard of this before, people surviving only for their bodies to finally fail when safety was within reach. It's dramatic, but he feels a small comfort in the fact that if he does go, it'll be at Buck's side.

Buck keeps his arm slung around Bucky's back pulling him tighter to him, Bucky hisses in pain when Buck's hand digs into his ribs, and his eyes dart to him, concerned. He adjusts his grip to his waist and holds the arm Bucky has slung over his shoulder, all but dragging him along. Buck wouldn't let him fall, Buck was his life raft in this ocean of bullshit.

The toothpick in Buck's mouth twirls to the other side of his mouth, a habit he has before he talks, and God Bucky had missed it. "It'll be a few days until there are enough bunks for us all again, you can bunk with me, nights get cold anyway. Most the men share."

It all still doesn't feel real, half dazed he responds, "Yeah, Buck, thanks."

They stumble up the couple steps to the barracks and down the hallway. Buck deposits him on a bottom bunk, wrapping a blanket around his shoulders. He hadn't realized how hard he was shaking, Buck holds the blanket ends until Bucky grabs them, "You warm up. I'll get you something to drink."

"You got a flask in here Buck? I never thought I'd see the day."

"You wish," The corner of Buck's mouth curls as he returns and sits next to handing him a cup of hot water, "It's not anything, but it's warm."

Buck doesn't ask him any questions and the other guys seem to be keeping their distance from them. But they stay close, Buck sits right next to him, arms pressed against each other, warmth bleeding through where they touch. The sound of Buck's slow steady breathing calms him down making his eyes feel heavy. He rests his head on Buck's shoulder, the metal mug warm in his hands. He was so tired, he was just going to close his eyes, just for a second.

He wakes to the sound of Gale's voice saying his name, he doesn't want to open his eyes in case it was all a dream.

Buck's hand lands on his shoulder, shaking him slightly, "Bucky, the Doc is here to check you out."

Bucky pries his eyes open and smiles when he sees Buck crouched at his bedside, the doctor stands next to him, "I'm fine, Buck."

Even as he says it, his words slur and the world thuds around him when he tries to sit up.

"You're not," Buck pins him with a look, "Now let the Doc look you over."

The doctor confirms his broken eye socket and ribs, prods at the wounds on his head and face, and even lets him know he's got a concussion.

"See Buck? I'm tip-top." He tries to smile at his joke, but it hurts so he winces instead. Buck isn't having it.

"How do I keep him alive, Doc?" Buck's ignoring him, that's fine as long as he can see him.

"It's a miracle his wounds aren't infected already, keep them clean as best you can with soap and water. Iodine would be better if you can scrounge it up. Have him rest as much as he can. If you have some extra cloth, try to stabilize his ribs. Keep an eye on his head, not much else we can do." The doctor sighs, "He made it here, if we can keep him from getting sick, he'll be alright."

Buck nods, not taking his eyes off John, the doc squeezes Buck's shoulder before he heads off to check on the other men in the room

Buck twists his mouth, assessing his injuries, deciding his next course of action. John knows he looks like shit, he sure feels like it, "Stay here, Bucky. I'll be back in a minute."

It's not like he could move if he wanted, but he nods anyway.

It's surreal, after those days of wondering what happened to Buck, wondering if he was dead or alive, that he was just here, giving him the same old shit he always gave him. Holding him up just when his strength had given out.

He watches Buck's back as he sifts through the meager supplies and piles what he needs in his arms. There are scars on either side of his face that weren't there the last time he saw him, his face is pale, and his hair is dirty, but he's still the most beautiful thing Bucky's ever seen. He can't believe Buck is here, really, truly here. His eyes well up and he fights to push the tears back down.

Buck is two steps away from the bunk when he stops dead in his tracks, a stricken look in his eyes, "Bucky?" He sets down a bowl of warm water and a cloth, and kneels next to the bed, placing a hand on his knee, "You're okay. We'll get you cleaned up, it'll be okay."

Bucky swallows and nods, Buck's eyes are huge as they look at him. He has to look away, if he looks into them for any longer, he'll fall apart completely.

Buck gently starts to clean his face with the damp cloth, it makes the water turn a gross ruddy brown as he rinses the cloth. Gentle fingers come around the hem of his shirt, "Let me wrap your ribs, and let's put on a new shirt."

Buck hisses when he sees John's chest, green and purple bruises still mottle his skin. But Buck's a soft touch, running the damp warm cloth over his skin, he flinches every time John does and leaves a soothing caress whenever Bucky hisses in pain. That last time someone treated him like this he was a child, now there was no reason for someone to treat him like he was precious, but Buck does, treats him like he's the most important thing in the world, and that hurts almost as much as his broken ribs and his cracked face. It makes Bucky want to bury himself inside Buck, crawl into the center of his being, and live there.

Buck went down.

He'd almost lost this, he lets out a shaky breath, "I thought I lost you, Buck."

Buck gently scrubs the cloth through his hair, the water is almost black now, "You know I'm too stubborn to die."

He knows Buck is trying to make him feel better, but he can't get over that Buck is here, that *he* is here. Grabbing his hand Bucky pulls it away from his hair, bringing up his other hand to hold Buck's in both of his, "I was so stupid, Buck. So stupid."

His words are barely more than a whisper. Tears are sliding down his cheeks now and he can't stop them.

"Shhh, John, no-"

"I said it'd be you and me left in the air. Buck, I said-" John chokes on his words.

"It's still you and me, Bucky." Buck puts his hand on Bucky's face, and makes him look him in the eye, "It will *always* be you and me."

Buck's hair is still blond and his eyes are still the blue of a summer sky. His lips are still full and plush and John is still shaken by the force of Buck's belief in him.

"Everything okay over there, Buck?"

Someone, Brady he thinks, calls over. Bucky looks over Buck's shoulder and sees that the men are still well clear of them, huddled around the heating stove.

Bucks pats the side of his face lightly, so lightly, not breaking eye contact. "We're good here, Brady. Just finding the man under all this dirt."

The guys laugh at the joke and go back to milling around. Paying them no mind.

"I don't know if there is a man left under all this, Buck." Buck's face crumples at John's words, he almost feels bad for saying them, for causing Buck any pain.

The hand on his face slides to his neck, and squeezes gently, "You're right here, John. I found you."

The bunk is cramped with both of them in it that night. Bucky is worried some of the others might think it's weird that he and Buck are bunking together, but when the Germans call lights out, most of the other men crawl into another bunk. Buck hadn't been lying about the cold, he could see his breath in the air above him. His still ribs ache, Buck had wrapped a torn blanket around him, it was comforting in a way, like being swaddled, but it made his breaths shallow and made it hard to fall asleep.

"You gotta try to sleep, John." Buck's breath ghosts over his cheek, he wouldn't be able to hear him if wasn't right next to him.

"Can't." It's all he can think, he just can't, he's been unconscious for

most of the last week, and he doesn't want to lose time again.

A hand brushes his lank curls away from his forehead and keeps stroking them gently, "C'mon, Bucky. You have to sleep. I'll be right here."

The soothing motion of Buck's hand in his hair *does* make his eyes heavy, he turns his head towards Buck and tries to look at him in the dark. He can't see much of anything, just the shine of his eyes in the lights that fall in through the small windows in the barrack.

The last thing he registers before he drifts off is the soft press of lips to his forehead, "There ya go, John, I got you."

It was probably just a dream.

There are arms wrapped around him, grabbing him, holding him. They're trying to hold him down, he has to get away. All the other men he was with were already dead. He had to get away. He pushes and fights, but his arms and legs aren't responding like they should, "Get off me! Get off-"

"Bucky."

The voice is firm and comforting. It's Buck's voice. Buck shouldn't be here, if Buck is here he was in danger too. John has to do something. He has to get them out. He starts to struggle again.

"Bucky, wake up. John, please."

His eyes drag open and Buck's face is in front of him, and he stops struggling. The early dawn light is enough to see that Buck is fine, they aren't in that bombed-out city. They are crammed in this tiny bunk in a drafty cold room.

"I've got you, John. I won't let anything happen to you."

Emotions rise up in John, an overwhelming relief that Buck is safe, that he is safe. The tears well up in his eyes again. He tries to cover it up but even to his ears, the joke sounds thin, "That's my line, Buck."

Buck's lips thin in a worried line, "What happened, Bucky?"

He thinks back to the past few days, and pulls in a shuddering breath, "I can't, Buck, I just can't"

The hand on his face runs soothingly through his hair, "Shh, it's alright, Bucky. We don't gotta talk."

He pulls Bucky's head to his chest, it's awkward with Bucky being bigger than him, but it feels nice. He makes himself as small as he can and wraps his arm around Buck's waist. It's been so long since they've been this close, he hears the steady beat of Buck's heart and lets it lull him back to sleep.

They hover in each other's orbit. Closer than they had been on base, as close as they had been before that night they spent together.

They keep sharing a bunk, it's too cold otherwise. So each morning they wake, legs tangled in one another's or pressed close together. The temperature keeps dropping and more of the men double up for warmth. He's happy it's so normal, but he fears he's getting too used to Buck sleeping at his side. But he worries about spring, when it starts to get warmer they'll have to separate. It's not something he's looking forward to, it could be the dead heat of summer and he'd still want to be pressed against Buck, but he knows that it's selfish. What they're doing now is a necessity, not a choice.

Nightmares wake John up other nights, he'd hoped they could be chased off by Buck but even with Buck next to him, he could hear the screaming of angry townspeople, smell the blood and smoke, feel the splatter of blood on his face. But each time he wakes to Buck holding his hand, his thumb running over his wrist soothingly, "I'm here, John. I ain't gonna let nuthin' happen to you."

Even when he hasn't completely woken up and the terror is still washing over him, it's enough to know that Buck is there with him.

Getting supplies in the camp is not an easy thing. The Red Cross can barely get through to bring them provisions, so trade and scavenging are the few things they can do to get what they need. New men keep trickling into camp, they bring news, but it's not enough to keep them up to date on how the war effort is going.

Buck is smart, but Bucky is resourceful. Buck decides he's going to make a radio when one of the new guys comes in and manages to hide the headphones in his aviator cap from the Germans. Gale gives Bucky the list and he finds all the parts. He's especially proud that he even manages to lift some parts from one of the loudspeakers without anyone noticing. It stops working and the Goons just replace it a few days later. Gathering the parts gives him a purpose, he doesn't

understand what Buck's building, but he sure as hell can get what he needs.

They have a surveillance watch set up for when Buck is building the radio; Demarco at the window, Hambone and Crank at either entrance, and Brady at the door. The other men spread out, some keeping the others company to help them look less suspicious, but others just walk around the grounds, too many people in one spot draws too much attention.

Bucky stayed under the pretense of helping Buck put the radio together, but he wouldn't know the first thing about it. The most he ends up doing is holding something still while Buck wires the parts together. Bucky watches his long fingers work, threading the delicate parts around one another, he's particularly distracted by Buck's fingers.

Buck sighs and holds the headphone up to his ear, turning the dials and listening. John doesn't think anything is coming through, not by the way Buck's brow is furrowed.

"Can you listen for something, John? I can't hear a damn thing." He holds out the headphone.

John presses it tight against his ear, there's nothing only silence, Buck fiddles with the radio and he keeps listening.

A loud burst of music makes him jump up and he drops the headphone. Buck laughs, light and happy and John can't help but smile, "You little shit, you did that on purpose."

Buck is still smiling, eyes full of mirth, "Gotta keep you on your toes, Bucky."

A few months later, when that radio gets taken in a raid, Bucky gets him the parts to make a new one. His little Kregie Marconi indeed.

They get into a rhythm; taking care of the men, building the intelligence network between the bunks. And every night he presses close to Buck as he falls asleep. He almost forgets that this isn't normal, this isn't something that will be accepted anywhere else, but he doesn't want to think that far ahead.

Then the mail comes, finally, and it's been so long that he forgets to look away. Forgets that Marge exists and Buck has that stupid smitten

look on his face as he leans forward to smell her perfume on the letter. The crashing reality of it all breaks his heart all over again. As much as he hated being cooped up in the Stalag, there has been one hell of a silver lining.

He doesn't ask about the letter, he doesn't wanna know.

That night he's in their bunk, waiting for Buck to give up his watch and come to bed. He rests his head on his arms looking at Buck as he stares out the window. He'll come to bed soon, but Buck was always the last one asleep, had to make sure everyone felt safe as they drifted off.

Buck meets his eyes, searching for something, when he speaks it's so quiet Bucky has to strain to hear it, "Last letter I sent before Bremen, I popped the question."

Bucky struggles to keep his poker face, to keep the disappointment and sadness from showing, "You did?"

It's needier than he wants it to sound, but he can blame it on being tired.

With a heavy sigh, "She said yes."

He knew this day would come. The day he finally couldn't ignore that Buck was going to get married, get a house, and have a pile of kids with Marge. He'd probably forget this whole damn war, forget about Bucky while he was at it.

"So?" He says and it sounds sharp, he tries again, "That's great." His words aren't warm, he wants them to be, for Buck. He still fails, "Congratulations."

"I was even thinking maybe you'd be my best man," There's a fear in Buck's voice, a hesitancy like Bucky might say no.

And everything in him *wants* to, he wants to tell him that he shouldn't marry Marge. Wants to be spiteful and refuse. Wants to scream into his face that it Buck said *'It'll always be you and me*' and that didn't include Marge. But he could never do that to Buck. So he just says, "I will be your best man."

Buck smiles at him and Bucky bites the inside of his cheek so hard he tastes blood. He turns to face the wall crowding himself as close as he can to it. The cold radiates off of it, it makes the tears that leak out of

the corner of his eyes feel that much hotter.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you ALL so much for the Comments and Kudos. I don't write much, but the quality of comments I got on the last chapter was just mind-blowing, I hit a small personal goal to make people feel as insane as I do when I read other people's stories.

So thank you again to everyone who read, commented and kudo'd. You're giving me life.

Yell at me on tumblr if ya like- Here

Escape Plans

Chapter Summary

> Life is the stalag is hard for everyone, but it's especially hard for Bucky.

Chapter Notes

> Bucky is really going through it in this chapter. Please enjoy
>
> Mentioning it again, Warning for light suicidal ideation in this chapter, but I wanted to throw the warning out just in cases.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Spring starts to rear its' head in the Stalag and everything starts to go to shit. The British stage an escape, they're successful, until they're caught and executed. The deaths of so many, *50 men,* makes them all nervous, adds an extra level of anxiety to everyone in the camp. Even Major Simoleit is on edge, he makes it clear that if anything happens the goons will come down hard. And no one, not even Major Simoleit, wants the SS and Gestapo here.

Bucky starts to spiral too, a combination of being stuck in this damn camp and the realization that he'd let his feelings for Buck go too far. After they get out, Buck will marry Marge. And he'll be alone, stuck with these feelings he knew better than to let grow. It's stupid, he's always known, but hearing the words from Buck's mouth made it real. He was going to be the best man at the wedding of the man he loved most.

They could never end up together, that wasn't how the world worked. But in those first months in the Stalag, sleeping next to Buck, spending almost every minute with him, he'd forgotten, and Marge's letter brought the reality of the situation crashing down on him.

It's not Buck's fault, it's not Marge's fault. Hell, he's only got himself to blame. So he does what he thinks is best, he separates himself, from Buck, from everyone. He walks alone, sleeps alone, and spends most of his time alone. It's not like he's not good company anyway.

Bucky has always had an especially sharp memory. He'd always remembered baseball games from the radio, calling up the plays from memory years after he'd listened to the game. He excelled at school,

not because he was smart, but because he could recall a lecture or a picture he'd seen in a book at a moment's notice. And it's because of this especially sharp memory that he never forgets the detail of Buck's face, never forgets the feeling of Buck pressed against him in sleep. Until now, he's never thought of his memory as a curse.

Sleeping alone had been hard, he'd kept to his own bunk even on nights when it was cold enough to share, he needed to keep his space from Buck. He doesn't sleep much, and when he does, he doesn't sleep well. There isn't a night that goes by that goes by that de doesn't wake up covered in sweat, trying to tell himself that he isn't on the back of a wagon, or in a burned-out town, that he isn't moments away from his death.

And what's worse is he's *lonely*. It's been months since anyone's touched him, no man is a saint and when he has the opportunity to take himself in hand, he tries to think about Veronica Lake, Paulina, or any other woman he's been with. He tried to think of soft bodies and smeared lipstick but there isn't one fantasy that doesn't end up turning into Buck's flushed cheeks and soft moans as he releases into his hand.

The weather is finally warming up, the nights are warmer and the frozen dirt of the Stalag has all turned to mud. He's going through the motions of a baseball game he remembers hearing on the radio. It's something to do, something to keep his mind busy, a way to expend the jittery pent-up energy thrumming through his limbs.

He's the only one out in the yard, the others all are staying in the barracks to stay out of the mud. He must look like a lunatic, maybe he is, but he can't stay cooped up with the men and Buck's concerned eyes on him anymore.

Buck strolls out, nonchalant as ever, and Bucky tries to brush him off. He can't handle this right now, "Big game going on here, Buck."

Buck makes a joke, not his usual kind, it's one he thinks Bucky will like, he's trying to make him laugh.

It should make him smile but it just makes Bucky more mad, so he ignores it and keeps playing.

Defeated, Buck lets out a resigned sigh, "You okay, Major?"

Major, not Bucky, not even *John*. He's not the only one trying to create distance.

He wants to hit something. So he swings his 'bat' instead, "Yeah. Why wouldn't I be okay?"

Bucky can tell Buck's missing his toothpick by the way he twists his mouth into a forced smile, "Just asking."

"You're just asking?" Annoyance burns in him, Buck's not stupid, he knows Bucky can't stand being cooped up like this with nothing to do. But Buck seems set on pretending nothing wrong, so he'll play along, "Well, I'm great, is the truth. I've been here for eight months now. Still trapped, still cold, still eating scraps. And we keep waiting for something to happen even though it doesn't."

Buck sighs, "It could be worse. We could be dead."

That's the funny thing; Death doesn't scare him at all.

"Well, maybe for you. At least that I could stand." Buck's face contorts but Bucky continues, "I can't stand this. What are we waiting for? Huh? We all think something's gonna happen. Maybe we need to *make* it happen."

Buck bristles, "Like those Brits did? Go and get executed? We have to be patient."

Bucky finally stops and meets his eyes, breathing in heavily, he is so agitated he wants to punch him, he wants to grab the sides of Buck's face and kiss the life outta him, throw him down in the mud and make him just as dirty as John. His whole body tenses torn between actions.

Buck, either ignorant or uncaring of John's heightened state, grabs his shoulder, the camaraderie and warmth clear in the motion, "I need you to be patient Bucky, *I* couldn't stand it if you died.

Buck holds his gaze, and dammit he means it, the comment sends John reeling. If he was spiraling before, he's free-falling now.

Months pass and the news is slim, the news from the radio says Allied forces are pushing for their advantages but they are few and far between. The progress is slow and Stalag Luft III is smack dab in the middle of occupied territory. Bucky's losing hope, shit, he's *lost* hope. They'll never escape and he's been falling for so long that he's almost looking forward to when he hits the ground.

It's late morning when he wakes to the sound of Buck's encouraging

voice, the sounds of the men outside twisting the stump out of the ground. He's been sleeping at odd times since he can't sleep at night, and he lets himself, a little taste of comforting oblivion. Even having just woken up, his limbs burn with the need to move, so he runs his hand through his hair and heads outside.

It's summer, but even in the heat, the camp is still a muddied mess. It's warm enough that Buck's just in his tank, and Bucky wants to run his hands over his tanned skin and sink his teeth into the strong muscles that flex in his back.

"That's it, boys. It's coming."

The men are working, working, working, like they're going to make a life here, preparing for another winter in this shit hole. John can't stand it, "Whoa. This looks like a work camp, the way you jackasses are grinding away."

The other men groan, they've all been annoyed with him lately, he's made sure of it. But Buck doesn't even acknowledge his shitty comments.

Buck throws his arm to the stump they're pulling up, explaining what they're doing like Bucky gives a shit, "Now the ground's loosened up, we got a chance of getting wood for cook fires."

For the life of him, he can't understand why they're doing all this extra work; why they are all dead set on making a life here. He's got to distract them, get them to stop, if they keep doing this it makes it all real, it means they won't ever escape. And they have to escape. They have to.

Baseball, they can play baseball. And he's off rambling, talking a mile a minute, he's just so desperate to get them to stop. They just need to *stop*.

Someone tells him to 'Either pitch in or knock it off' and he shoves them, he wants to fight. And that's when Buck finally loses his patience with him, pulling him away from the guy and shoving him into the mud, "What the hell's wrong with you?"

He can't answer that, not in any way that matters.

Buck has never shoved him before, not even as a joke but he's always kept this side of himself away from Buck. Now though, Bucky wants to see how far he can push this, how far he can push Buck. He puts his

arms behind his head, "You're the new king of the camp, and I'm just in the way?"

Buck's face falls and he sees the regret there.

NO.

That's not what he wants, he wants Buck to snap again, "Oh, King Cleven says, 'No baseball. Just work, work, work.' That's all he wants to do."

"I'm sorry. Come on." Buck tries to help him up, but Bucky just swats him away.

Buck keeps trying to help him up talking to him in soothing tones, and he keeps pushing him away. He doesn't even know what he's saying but he wants to fight, he just wants Buck to touch him, even if it's just to make him bleed.

Now Buck's on the ground too and Bucky's foot kicks at his ribs, Buck, lets out a sharp gasp and twists up punching him in the face. He can feel the blood leaking from his brow bone. Now that it's started he doesn't want to stop, tangled up in Buck, his hands on him leaving bruises wherever they touch. If this is all Buck will give him, he wants it all.

The other men are egging Buck on, or begging them off, but Bucky blocks them out, fisting his hands in Buck's shirt and listening to Buck's heavy breathing as they struggle, he's high with it.

The camp speakers blare something in German that no one understands, and they both stop.

"What's going on?" Bucky asks like they haven't just been trying to beat the hell out of each other.

Buck rolls off of him. Something big has happened, he hasn't bothered to learn German, but Buck has picked up a few things.

"Looks like the Krauts got some bad news." Buck crouches concentrating on the words. The men mutter but Bucky doesn't hear them, the guards are trying to get them back in the bunks, but Bucky is locked on Buck's face. "We're in Western Europe. It finally happened."

It's awkward after the fight, the men are avoiding him and he doesn't blame them, if he could get away from himself he would too. So now he's sitting on the back steps of the barracks in the shade when he hears someone sit next to him. He doesn't even have to turn his head to know it's Buck. It almost feels like all those times together in the Jeep, waiting for Buck to say something, but this time he knows he has to make the first move.

"I'm sorry about today, Buck," He can't look at Buck, even though he can feel his eyes burning a hole into his face. "Your ribs okay?"

"Better than your eye, John."

Bucky laughs, something hollow and sad, "I deserve worse."

Buck shifts next to him, sliding closer so their arms are pressed together, "Don't say that, John. You don't."

Now Bucky looks at him, meeting those sky-blue eyes that remind him of when everything was simpler and easier and he hadn't lost his friends and he hadn't almost died fifty times over. Buck looks like he believes what he said, but that couldn't possibly be true, "How can you say that?"

Anger spreads over Buck's face, Bucky wonders if he'll hit him again. Though now he's not sure he wants it, even if he does deserve it.

"Cause you're one of the best damn men I've ever met, and you don't deserve one goddamn bad thing that's ever happened to you." Buck's eyes are burning, he says it with so much conviction that Bucky almost believes it too.

The look on Buck's face is so serious and genuine, that he laughs for real this time, "We both know that's not true. I definitely deserved some of it."

Buck tries to hide his smile, "I said what I said, Bucky." He bumps their shoulders together again, "I know this has been harder for you than most and I can hold it together for both of us, but I need you to try. These boys," he sighs, "What's coming- I'm gonna need your help. I can't do this alone. It's you and me, remember?"

And of course. Because it's Buck asking, "Okay, Buck. Okay."

The invasion has given Bucky back some semblance of sanity, it gives

him the handholds to climb back out of the darkness. It doesn't happen immediately, or even quickly, but it happens.

They all finally have a goal: stay alive until they can escape or be rescued.

There are three scenarios, and none of them end well. If the allies or the Russians get too close the Goons will likely execute them or march them. If the Goons decide to hunker down and fight, they'll need to wage war from the inside.

The men are underfed and weak. Too much time sitting around doing nothing, so Bucky starts up work rotations. Multiple rotations on the stump remover, wheeling dirt for their 'Victory Garden', shoveling soot from the cook fires. All activities that won't raise too much attention.

He keeps track of the food stores, there is a fine line between what they need to eat to build muscle and what they need to store up. He even starts drawing maps, he's not any good at it, but he's better than anyone else here. He sketches out some escape routes, and some maps of the region, cramming them into the books they keep in their cabin for safekeeping. He tries to teach some others his organization system but none of them can master it, so whenever they need a map they come to Bucky and he finds it for them.

Crank takes care of the weapon-making, he's got great carving skills and is a great teacher. Lt. Colonel Clark takes care of the fight training, teaching the men to tear out throats and overpower men. Everyone is doing their jobs and Bucky starts to feel like they might actually get out of this alive. At least now they're doing something.

More and more SS soldiers have been showing up, Glemnitz and Simoleit have been doing their best to be the barrier between them, but there may come a point soon when they need to make their move. Simoleit has still refused to push for the Jewish soldiers among them, taking their original 'There are only Americans in Stalag Luft III.' as truth.

The days are getting colder again, Bucky thought Wisconsin had tough winters, but Poland has got it beat in spades. It's only the end of August and the nights are cold enough that there is frost on the ground when they wake.

Buck's bunk is above his so they stand close and bump into one another as they get ready for bed. Neither of them has mentioned sharing a bunk again, even with some of the other men bunking

together to fight the chill. Tonight though, Buck seems to be fidgeting, delaying getting into his own bunk, hesitant in a way Bucky rarely sees.

Buck clears his throat, "Hey Bucky. It's- uh pretty cold tonight."

Bucky can hear the question in his words, but he wants him to ask. So he plays at being obtuse, "Yeah, sure is."

"We need to make sure we all get some good sleep, not just shivering all night."

Buck is never this roundabout, but Bucky *needs* him to ask. "We do."

With a heavy exhale, "I know it's been a while. But uh-" their eyes meet, and Buck looks nervous, "Could we bunk together?"

A smile splits his face, "All you have to do is ask."

It's been so long that he's forgotten how close they need to to fit. There's a bit of distance between them, Buck on his side facing away from him. They're not touching, Bucky isn't sure he should. But Buck turns his head, meeting his eyes, "C'mere Bucky, I'm cold."

Bucky shifts forward, but Gale reaches behind him pulling Bucky's arm around him, pressing his back against Bucky's front as he does. Buck lets out a contented sigh, "That's better."

Bucky buries his nose into Buck's soft hair, wrapping his arm tighter, "Yeah, Buck. Yeah, it is."

He laughs and Buck shifts in curiosity, "What?"

"Told you I was the big spoon." He laughs again and Buck does too.

For the first time in months, he sleeps well.

There's no barber in the Stalag, well there is, but he's in North encampment and off limits. So they're all stuck cutting each other's hair.

Some of the men let it grow, only trimming it when it reached their collar, while others try their luck by letting someone else cut it. None of them are very *good* at cutting hair. And it makes for some amusing first tries and a number of men taking a new interest in the knit hats floating around the camp.

But to the surprise of no one, especially not Bucky, Buck cuts his own hair, and is pretty good at it. Not only that, he's also good at cutting other people's hair. Word gets out around camp and soon there are days when men are lined up down the hall waiting for their turn to get the 'Cleven special'.

Buck has always seemed, annoyingly, like the perfect man. He was one of the most talented flyers in their training group, he was good at maps and radio and dog fighting. He picked up new skills like some people collect seashells on a beach. Not only was he good at everything, he was just plain *good*. He knew how to provide strength for his men, comfort those who needed it, and he had an uncanny ability to charm people into doing whatever he asked.

Annoyingly perfect.

But also not. Bucky knew the vanity he had for his hair, his looks. Buck knew he was a good-looking guy and spent the time making sure he looked good. Before the Stalag, he'd spend time artfully styling each strand of hair so it was perfectly in place, shaving so precisely you'd think the man didn't grow facial hair. Bucky made fun of him for it, but he also didn't mind the results. So Buck being good at cutting hair didn't really come as a surprise to him.

One evening, the men head into the room next to theirs for a performance. Some of them had wrangled a few instruments, a trumpet, clarinet, a makeshift drum someone had made, and Jameson had a beautiful tenor and liked to sing. It was nice to huddle around the group and be entertained for once. Several of the others joined in the songs they knew, drinking weak cups of coffee on the cold night.

It was raining, the kind of heavy fat raindrops that soaked through your clothes and chilled you to the bone, it was better to stay inside on days like these. They were all cold enough as it is, and it was nicer all huddled together, listening to their loving dubbed 'Kregie Quartet'. The room was warm, packed full of soldiers looking to forget their circumstances.

He and Buck are leaned against the wall, always hanging back like a pair of border collies looking after the herd, their shoulders are pressed together, arms crossed. Bucky closes his eyes, letting the music wash over him, they had a few records but nothing seemed to match the energy of live music. He'd missed the way the drum made his chest rumble the way his spine tingled when the trumpet hit a particular note.

He thinks he's discovered a new sensation music gives him, when he realizes it's just Buck's fingers pulling on the curls at the back of his neck. He opens his eyes and looks over to Buck, but he just keeps pulling curls from under his hat.

So with a grin, he asks, "Whatcha doing, Buck?"

He barely keeps the laugh out of his voice, and Buck doesn't even pay it any mind, "Your hair's getting long, Bucky, you need a haircut."

John does laugh now, "Oh. Do I? Am I out of regulation, Major?"

Buck just rolls his eyes, "Just askin' why you didn't get a cut when I was givin' them the other day."

Bucky pulls off his cap and runs his hand through it, pulling through the tangles. Buck watches his hand on its travels, '" Spose you're right. Just seemed like you might be sick of cutting hair, it can wait."

"How bout now?" Buck's voice sounds off, but Bucky can't place in what way.

"Now?" Bucks asks, surprised.

Buck clears his throat, "Why not?"

He can't help but smile but narrow his eyes, something is off. And he sees Buck's restless fingers and it clicks together; Buck needs away from the guys, he needs space. His eyes are a little wild, so Bucky gives him the excuse he needs to leave, reputation intact.

"You're right, be nice to get some of this off." He walks out the door and Buck follows him down the hall to their room. He can see the way Buck's shoulders relax as soon as they enter and no one else is there.

Bucky takes a chair and spins it out and away from under the table, giving Buck the space he needs to get at his hair from different angles. Buck shuffles through his things finding the one pair of scissors they were able to scrounge between them and brings what's left of a water carafe from earlier in the day.

Bucky knows better than to talk right now, so he sits while Buck wets his hands and runs them through his hair, damping the strands. It's not a bad deal, he likes the feeling of Buck's fingers in his hair, the feeling of his short blunt nails scratching his scalp. Buck seems to be enjoying the process as well, taking his time, gently untangling the

knots in his hair.

"Always been jealous of these curls," Buck breathes wrapping his unruly front curl around his finger, letting it spring back into place.

Bucky lets out a breathy laugh, "That's some compliment coming from you. 'Specially when everyone in camp is trying to imitate your hair."

The scissors clip behind his ear, and Buck is running his hand through his hair again, "Guess you always want what you don't have."

Bucky doesn't have anything to say to that, not a goddamn thing. He just watches his curls fall to the floor around him.

Buck comes round to the front and buries his fingers in the longer curls at Bucky's' front pulling on them harder than he probably has to to get them to cooperate. A moan erupts from the back of Bucky's throat, and he panics, covering it up with a cough.

If Buck notices, he doesn't say anything, he just gives Bucky a light pat on his cheek. "There, now you could give Gregory Peck a run for his money."

And Bucky makes a joke, he *has* to, otherwise, he's going to push Buck into the wall and kiss him until he pulls his hair again.

"Peck huh?" He brushes the strands of hair off his shoulders, "Always thought I was a bit more like Cary Grant myself." He strikes a caricature of his most dashing pose, it makes Buck laugh and it makes him feel like he's soaring above the clouds in a star-filled sky.

Most times, John felt like a useless asshole, but at least he could still make Buck Cleven laugh, and for now, that was going to be enough for him.

The weather cools faster than they'd hoped, the garden dies, and the ground is too frozen to work the stump remover. All the momentum they had stops, the goal is gone and he's back to sitting and biding his time.

He's sitting on the steps of the barracks, it's freezing, but he can't go inside. It's too cramped, too crowded, he feels himself wanting to start a fight so he does the only thing he can do: he separates himself.

The door opens and closes behind him. It's Buck. It's always Buck.

Even when he doesn't deserve it, Buck finds him and keeps him company. They sit in silence watching their breath fog the air.

"We should head inside soon, can't have you catching a cold out here." Buck tries.

Bucky lets out another breath watching the cloud form and dissipate in front of him, "You go on ahead, Buck."

Buck sighs, "Bucky I need y-"

"You need me to what, Buck?" He snaps, whipping his head to meet Buck's startled gaze. The softness in Buck's voice sets him off. This whole time it's been 'I need you to be patient',' I need you to try', I need you to help', 'I need you to' 'I need you to' 'I need you to'. What could Buck be asking for that he hasn't already given? He didn't have anything left.

Buck's eyes are huge and glassy, he shakes his head. Bucky's never seen him like this, Buck pulls in a sharp breath, "I need you. I just need you. That's all."

John's jaw clenches, he wants to pull Buck into a kiss, but he stays still, "You have me," he says cautiously.

Clearing his throat, Buck drags his hand over his face, "Do I?"

He's not even really sure what Buck is asking and he's too afraid to clarify. But there's so much fear on Bucks face and he would do anything to wipe it away, "Yes. You always have. You always *will*."

It's not even half of what he would want to say but it seems to be enough.

Buck nods, pressing his lips together, "Just don't-" He lets out a shaky breath, "Just don't disappear on me again, John. Don't shut me out. I couldn't take it."

Bucky's not sure what to say, this feels important. It feels significant, but he's not sure in what way.

He swallows, and he can see Buck's edges fraying, just ever so slightly. Buck won't let the men see, but Bucky is still, somehow, the exception to Buck's rules.

Bucky deflates, feeling like an asshole for his outburst. He wasn't the

only one having a hard time, "I won't, Buck. Not again."

Buck's hand drops between them and grabs Bucky's, wrapping his long fingers around John's and squeezing. He doesn't acknowledge the action, he just basks in the contact. They are close enough and the sky is dark enough that no one can see their hands in the shadows between them.

They stay like that until lights out and only stop long enough to crawl into their bunk. Buck's hand reaches out and pulls Bucky's hand to his chest as they fall asleep.

Neither of them mentions the conversation they had or the hand-holding, and Bucky writes it off. Before the Stalag, Bucky had always been the one supporting Buck, bringing him back to himself after a rough mission, but here, Buck had been doing that for Bucky. It wasn't something Buck was used to and it made Bucky feel guilty for being so self-absorbed he'd missed Buck's troubles entirely.

They fall into their routine again, at night Buck crawls in next to him and they wake up wrapped in one another. He knows he shouldn't get used to it, that this is a temporary situation and when they finally get out of here, Buck will go marry Marge and Bucky will just have the memory of this closeness.

As much as he wants to savor each moment he has with Buck, he hasn't forgotten about escaping. They don't have a year to dig tunnels, the guards are onto that ruse anyway and it's unlikely they could convince enough prisoners to stage a successful revolt. He's out of ideas, he thinks about trying to pass as a guard, but then even if he did and got a few others out, how would they get back to allied forces? What would they eat? How would they hide?

It was a logistical nightmare and he just wasn't smart enough to solve it.

Luckily for him, a few months ago a few guys from the Red Tails came into camp, every one of them was smart as a whip. Jefferson could draw maps from memory that would make a cartographer cry. Macon could calculate rations, distance, travel time, and anything else with the speed and accuracy he'd never seen before, Daniels had a memory for faces, guard movements, and timings, there wasn't an activity in this whole camp that Daniels didn't know about and track. It's all information they can use to plan an escape.

He and Alex had hit it off, Bucky spent time listening to Alex talk about the jazz clubs in Detroit, his fiancée, planes, and how much he wanted a coney dog. For once Bucky was happy to listen, it was a nice companionship between them. Alex had drawn girls for almost every man in the camp. Once, he asked Bucky if he wanted one and Bucky just waved him off. He didn't need a drawing, the person he wanted was here with him.

Buck and Alex also hit it off too, seeing as they were both smart as hell. It only made sense that those two would see what they could come up with in terms of escape, and the library became their defacto meeting spot. Turns out, if you make enough of a show asking for new books the Krauts start not to question when the same people that go in the library all the time.

He's shoveling the soot out of the cook fires when Alex puts a hand on his shoulder, "Buck wants to talk to you, he's in the library."

Alex takes the shovel from him and takes his place. He nods in thanks and heads there. He does note, with a little pride, that everyone in camp calls Buck 'Buck'. Not Gale, Not Cleve. Buck. The name Bucky gave him.

The library is small, there are a few chairs, a table, and Buck sitting in the corner, reading a book whose title was worn off long ago.

He closes the door behind him and grabs a book, flipping through it for good measure, "What's going on, Buck?"

"Got something I could use your opinion on," Buck flips through his book and pulls out a piece of paper. A map. "News has it that Soviets are headed toward the Oder River, they're gettin' close."

Buck stands and walks to the table next to Bucky, laying the map out and pointing to a river not far from their location. Looking at the map the Oder River is only fifty or sixty miles from them, "How close is close?"

Buck's brow furrows, "Not sure, but if they hit the Oder, that's probably when they'll march us or kill us." Buck steps a little closer to Bucky, "Do we try to make a break for it before that?"

He walks his finger from the Oder to the Stalag, on paper it doesn't look that far, just an inch, maybe two. There is hope in Buck's eyes, and Bucky hates to be the one to dash it out, "Even if we made it out of here, and that's a *big if*, then we'd have to make it fifty or so miles

through German territory without getting caught, then make it to the Soviets. With the weather getting colder, I doubt we'd be able to do it."

Bucky sighs, "That's what I thought too."

There was disappointment in Buck's voice, and John hated it, Buck was starting to fray more now and he didn't know how to help. He could see it in the tightness of his jaw, the tersness in his voice. Bucky would do anything for him, including but not limited to, attempting ill-planned escapes.

"The odds aren't good, but if you want to try it," He leans close to Buck, "I'll make sure you make it home in one piece."

Buck pins him with a look, "We." He jabs his finger on the table emphasizing each word, "*We* are going to make it home in one piece."

And damn, Bucky would try, but if it came down to it, he would always choose Buck. He works his jaw. How do you explain to someone that they are worth more than you? Bucky tries, "I got no one to go home to. No one would miss me."

Buck's brow furrows, but he keeps his voice light, "You said you were gonna be my best man."

Bucky closes his eyes, taking in a deep breath as he tries to unclench his jaw, "I'm sure you could find someone else." he meets Buck's eyes, "Someone better than me."

Anger shoots through Buck's face, grabbing the front of Bucky's shirt and shoving him into the corner by the door, "There is no one better than you!"

All those times he wanted Buck to hit him, and now all he feels is tired. Resigned. He puts his hands gently on top of Bucks, "We both know that's not true."

"The hell I don't!" Buck shakes him as if he can rattle the understanding into him. Buck is about to say more but Bucky runs his thumb over Buck's knuckles softly and whatever he is about to say dies on his lips.

If he has to make Buck hate him then so be it. He pulls out his final card, he has to make Buck understand.

"There's no home for me. The way I feel-" Bucky sucks in a sharp breath, "-about you. It's not what you feel for me. There's no chance of the future I want. So if it comes down to a choice between us, it's you, Buck. It'll always be you."

Buck drops his head between his arms and makes a pained noise.

There, Buck finally understands. He keeps running his thumb over Buck's knuckles soothingly, "It's okay, Buck. You have Marge. You have a whole life to live after you get out of here. So if you get the chance you take it, you get out of here."

There's no such thing as privacy in the Stalag, but here, in the silent seclusion of the library, Bucky is grateful they've managed some. Buck's hands still fisted in Bucky's shirt, head hanging. Buck just needs time, he'll get there, he's too kind to push John away for his inappropriate feelings. For the future that John dreams about that he can never have, the one that Buck doesn't want.

It's why John loves Buck, his big soft heart and genuine goddamn gentleness.

Just when Bucky thinks of pulling Buck's hands away, he hears Buck say very softly, "What if it's not just you?" Bucky's hands tighten and Buck lifts his head to meet Bucky's eyes, "What if I want that too?"

The air is sucked out of his lungs, "You don't know what you're saying, Buck."

Buck's eyes hold his, unwavering, "I do. I absolutely know what I'm saying."

Bucky feels a surge of anger pulse through him, and he shoves Buck away, "Then you don't mean it!" He takes a breath and when he speaks his voice is choked, "Don't toy with me, Buck." Bucky won't let himself believe it. Buck just thought he was being nice, giving something for Bucky to live for, but his words were just a knife through his heart. "Don't you dare say something you don't mean."

Buck growls and pulls Bucky to him, kissing him, needy, hungry, and desperate. And Bucky, for all his bluster, melts into it, moaning when Buck sucks on his tongue, hand gripping Buck's back and pulling him even closer. It's better than he remembered. Even though Buck's lips are chapped and his stubble scratches his cheek, he never wants to stop.

When Buck pulls away they're both panting, he rests his forehead on Bucky's, "I do mean it. I don't know how it'll work, but I wanna try. If I'm gonna bet on anything, John, I'm gonna bet on us."

John is willing to believe, he's not sure if it's stupidity, weakness, or his blind trust in Buck, but he believes. He can't not. Anything else would destroy him.

He leans forward again and presses his mouth to Gale's, pulling them flush together. It's less passionate than their last kiss but no less exciting, "You don't bet, Buck."

Buck smiles into his mouth, "I will." pressing a quick kiss into his lips, "Just this once."

Chapter End Notes

Finally ending on a non-tragic note. Enjoy it while it lasts.

My Tumblr

The March

Chapter Summary

It's a long road to get where they need to go.

Chapter Notes

Oof. My computer did not want to cooperate with the posting of this chapter.

Please enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They end up not even having time to come up with an escape plan or even to try a stupid one.

A few days later, shortly after lights out, one of the men throws open their door and tells them they have 30 minutes to gather what they can to prepare for the march.

After a mostly wordless conversation, they split up, Bucky corrals their men outside, putting the final touches on the sleds to carry provisions and Buck directs the men inside on what food they need to gather, Brady runs in between the two dispersing the few extra clothes they have to the people that need them.

It's gonna be a cold walk, the weather's already turned for the worse. It was bitterly cold and the snow, like tiny ice shards, stung his face like a thousand little needles.

Buck appears at his side, "How you doing?"

He shakes the cold off like a dog would water, keeping his eyes on the fences between him and freedom. Now isn't the time, too cold, too many soldiers watching them, "Would have preferred it if the Russians made it here first."

"Mmm." Buck is antsy next to him, the last few days he's been restless, John knows the feeling, but Buck has always been better when it's calm, John was always better when everything was chaos. Buck sighs, "You’re not thinking of running, are you?"

The question surprises him, but he sees the wildness in Buck's eyes

behind that calm expression, Buck has been worrying him lately. He pins Buck with a look, "*You're* not thinking of running, are you?"

For a moment Buck looks guilty, letting out another heavy sigh, like he wants to disagree with Bucky even when he knows he's right. Just to make sure Buck doesn't get any reckless ideas, he says, "Not in this icebox."

He wants to say something more, but Hambone is shoving his face with canned meat, he's gunna make himself sick. By the time he has a moment to talk to Buck again, they're trudging through the cold night.

There was one winter in Manitowoc when he was fourteen his dad had taken him ice fishing on Lake Michigan. He never liked fishing, there wasn't enough to do for his restless fingers and mile-a-minute brain, but in the cold winter months of Wisconsin, he was desperate to get out of the house, so he had agreed.

He remembers sitting on a folding stool trying to control his shivering as the snowy winds buffeted him and his dad. Neither of them would admit they were near hypothermia, sitting around that little hole in the ice. They only caught one measly fish that they ended up throwing back. They called it after that but Bucky remembers the bone-deep chill that took him hours to shake, it was the coldest he'd ever been in his life, at least until now.

The snow only got heavier since they left the Stalag, instead of tiny ice shards, the snow was now large fat flakes that melted a refroze as they landed. His hat kept it from freezing on his hair, but there were ice crystals on his eyelashes that distracted him every time he blinked. Buck's hair was frozen, his ears burning and red. He wants to reach over and cover Buck's ears with his hands, but it's a silly idea, they can't be that obvious.

They finally stop on the side of the road to take a small break, and Bucky knows he shouldn't but Buck has that big old scarf and won't wrap it around himself properly. So Bucky reaches out and pulls a layer of the scarf up and over Buck's hair and ears wrapping the lower half of his face in the other layer. "Jeeze Buck, I thought Wyoming got cold, you leave your ears out like that you're gonna lose 'em."

He knows Buck is smiling by the way his eyes crinkle, then he says, slightly muffled, "You got me looking like my grandma."

Bucky lets out a puff of air, as he tucks the ends of the scarf into

Buck's coat, "Then I can see where you got your looks from, she must've been a hell of a dame."

Buck laughs and reaches out to pop Bucky's collar, blocking his neck from the wind, "Thanks, Bucky."

They continue through the night and into the early hours of the morning until they reach the brickworks. The men rush in shoving and pushing their way over to the kilns that line the walls, warming their hands and faces.

There is not enough room for them to do much, so once they've all taken turns warming up by the fire, most of the men find a spot and snuggle up with a friend. It would almost be funny to watch all these battle-hardened soldiers, sleeping in piles like overlarge puppies if it weren't for the cold, and the hunger, and the sickness.

They've been here for hours and it feels like his cheeks are melting, but his toes are still so cold they hurt. He's leaning up against the end of a table when Buck reappears from the crowd and sits next to him, pressing close to his side.

"Scuttlebutt is we’re heading to a train station at first light." Gale's nose is red and running, his eyes bloodshot, he looks terrible and all Bucky wants to do is make him feel better. But that can't happen until they get the hell out of here.

"Scuttlebutt know where we’re going?" If he can figure out where they are headed, he can get an idea of where they are, and what the best point is to make an escape.

"No. Just to be ready at dawn."

Buck is shaking, Bucky can tell he's trying to hide it, but he can feel it through the side where they're pressed together. He lifts up his arm and wraps it around Buck's shoulders, "C'mere Buck."

Buck stills next to him, and meets his eyes, he doesn't say anything but the statement is obvious, 'We shouldn't.'.

Bucky laughs, a small hollow thing, "Look around, Buck, be even weirder if we didn't."

There's a huff of air, and Buck presses in, letting Bucky pull him close. It is warmer like this, and in the few hours they're going to get to rest he'd rather go it with Buck in his arms. Buck falls asleep on his

shoulder and he rests his head against Buck's head, soft strands tickling his nose.

The next morning they're loaded onto a train. Bucky remembers the last time he was on a train, the shot, the soldier dead on the ground. There are fewer guards but Bucky doesn't want to chance it, he doesn't want to make this train ride next to a body. He sees some of the men's eyes darting around looking for an opening.

"Buck," he whispers, "We have to make sure everyone gets on the train, we have to make sure no one does anything stupid."

Buck tosses a questioning look his way, his face then changes to understanding. Bucky's not sure what he saw there, but Buck nods, "Sure, John. We'll get everyone on this train safe and sound."

As defacto leaders of their group, when they tell everyone to get on the train, they do. It's something Bucky is ridiculously grateful for, but he can't untense, it feels like his muscles are made of stone. He almost startles when Buck clasps his shoulder, "We got 'em all on, Bucky, we're all here, we're all safe."

Bucky scoffs, "Safe as we can be anyway."

Buck lets his hand slide off his shoulder, pressing his lips into a thin line.

The train is cramped, there isn't enough room to sit down, and Bucky's knees start to ache from the walking, the standing, the cold.

Solly starts to crack, and Bucky doesn't blame him, he's a Jewish man in Germany. Daniels and Buck are able to comfort him a little bit and calm him down. He's glad they stepped in, Bucky isn't sure he had it in him to provide comfort to anyone right now, his own fears keep threatening to bubble up and swallow him.

He catches Buck's eye, "Hasn’t, uh, gone exactly how we thought, has it?"

Buck exhales sharply through his nose, it's as close to a laugh as he can get right now, "Not exactly." He pauses, "You wish you’d done it differently?"

It's not just the war Buck's asking about, it's everything. It's them, this newfound- whatever it was- between them.

"Can’t say I would have." It's the truth, he would do it again if it meant knowing Buck. But now he wants to know if it's the same for him, "You?"

"I wasn’t planning on getting shot down."

The reply knocks the wind out of John's sails, it was an easy dismissal for Buck. Bucky knew better, but he'd still hoped. It was still hard to believe what Buck said in the library, he wanted to believe it, really, but every doubt, every unsaid word ate at John, made him doubt that they could have a chance after all this.

"You know," Buck shifts, almost under his breath, "I really did believe that if there was only two B-17s left, be you and me flying ’em."

All he can do is let out a sad chuckle and meet Buck's eyes. He hopes it conveys the feelings he has. Gale looks so young, it reminds him of that night watching the flak when Gale told him about his father. He clenches his hands in his pockets.

The smile on Buck's face is fragile, "Last few years would have been a lot rougher without you, John."

Bucky has to press his lips together to keep from kissing the life out of Buck. It might be the closest thing to a love confession he'll ever get, "Mmm. Same."

It's not enough, but it's enough.

They match through Nuremberg until reach another camp and Bucky realizes just how good they had it at Stalag Luft III. Stalag Luft VII was little more than mud and tents, with little protection from the elements.

In the unlikeliest of coincidences, Buck meets up with a friend from Casper, George Neithammer. He's a nice guy, likes baseball, looks out for Buck, and that's all he can ask of a new friend.

George helps them get settled. He wasn't lying when he said that most of the tents didn't have fires, but he finds them a small, dry, corner in one of the tents and leaves them there to get sorted, saying he'll return with some blankets. The tent reminds him of the blanket forts he used to make as a kid, crates stacked in makeshift walls, blankets hanging to create some semblance of privacy. The men in the tent help them sort the crates to make a wind break on the outside corner and they

hang an unused tarp to keep the heat inside the little space they've staked out.

It's surprisingly warm, he doesn't want to use the word *cozy* but it keeps popping into his head anyway. It's just him and Buck in their little closed-off space. It can't be more than a few feet wide, just barely long enough for them to lie down, but he's grateful for it. It's just enough privacy that he might be able to press his lips to Buck's and it's the only thing he's wanted since they started the march.

George returns with a threadbare blanket and two tin mugs, "Could only scrounge up one blanket, but I'm sure you boys are used to sharing by now. I'll come get you for dinner if you don't get in line quick, you're likely not to get any food, and you look like you could use a meal." George tosses the blanket to Buck, "Seems like the guys got you two set up, I'll let you rest. That was one hell of a walk they put you all on."

They take a few minutes to rest, to warm up. Bucky hasn't been able to feel his toes since Stalag Luft III, and he and Buck bask in the relative warmth of their little blanket fort.

Buck, bumps his shoulder, "I feel like a little kid."

A laugh huffs out of him, "I'd tell ya a ghost story, Buck, but I can't think of nothin' scarier than what we've been through."

Buck closes his eyes, knocking his head back against the crates that form the wall behind them, "Ain't that the truth."

They sit a moment longer, the tent is loud, men talking and shuffling around. But that doesn't matter much to Bucky, he's so exhausted that he starts to doze off.

"Bucky," Buck whispers, close.

He pries his eyes open and Buck's face is close to his, he turns his head toward Buck, "Yeah?"

And now, it really does feel like two kids at a sleepover whispering in the dark, trying not to wake the other kids.

Buck's hand comes up to hold his neck, his cold fingers sliding just under his knit hat to rest in John's hair. He hesitates for a moment then leans forward pressing their lips together in a small chaste kiss, pulling back almost as quickly as it happened, "Get some rest, Bucky."

Buck's words puff against his lips and Bucky smiles, "I was, but someone woke me up."

Buck kisses him again, a little deeper, but no less quick, "You think you can ever forgive me?"

"I think, I might be able to." He settles against Buck's shoulder and closes his eyes. The taste of Buck still on his lips.

Dinner is even worse than Bucky thought it could be, tiny, unidentifiable chunks that float around in vaguely brown water. They check on the rest of their crew making sure everyone is settled in, has what they need. Word is that they will begin marching again soon, but no one knows when. Probably depends on how close the Russians are getting.

The camp calls lights out shortly after the sky goes dark, Bucky can't help but be relieved, he's exhausted, and all he wants to do is press close to Buck and listen to his heartbeat until he falls asleep. But the ground is cold, frozen, and the cold seeps up through the thin planks of the tent floor. They take off Buck's jacket laying it under them and putting Bucky's jacket over them, it helps a little. Their blanket fort is helping keep the warm air in, even so, he's pressed chest to chest with Buck.

The man next to them is snoring loudly, many are, the tent is still loud even when most of its inhabitants are sleeping. Between the snoring and the talking and the guards making their rounds, he's not sure he'll be getting much sleep tonight. But he can plan, he can count beats between the guard rotations and patrols, he can do something even if he can't sleep.

Buck's hand comes up to wrap around his neck, "We oughta get some sleep, Bucky."

Resting his forehead on Buck's, he sighs heavily, "Don't know how anyone can sleep with all the racket going on."

"It's not just the racket is it?" Buck whispers. "You're still planning. I can hear your gears turnin'."

"We can't just keep following orders, if we see an opportunity we need to take it, we're already too far into Germany."

"But we gotta be smart about it, we can't risk ourselves. We both get

out or neither of us do."

"Buck," Bucky sighs, "if you have the opportunity, you leave, with or without me. I'll make sure to get you out safe."

Bucky can barely see anything under the tarp they're under, but he can feel Buck's nose brush his and he stills.

There is a warm puff of air against his lips as Bucks whispers, "Not a chance."

Before he can ask what Buck is talking about Buck's lips press into his, wrapping his hand in the sweater that Bucky wears. Bucky almost forgets where he is, and loses himself in the kiss. Buck's tongue licking into him, tracing the roof of his mouth, hands skimming his chest through the thick sweater he wears, he wants nothing more than to strip down naked and press every inch of his body into Buck's. Kiss down every inch of him.

But then Buck freezes, the guy on the other side of the tarp next to them, who was snoring up a storm, suddenly stops. They both breathe into each other's mouths, still as they can be. Bucky wonders if they were too loud and woke everyone up, but then the man just starts snoring again, louder than before.

They both laugh softly and Buck pulls him back and kisses him, hungry and messy. Buck's hand finds its way under Bucky's shirt, slowly unbuttoning his loose pants and sliding his hand inside.

Bucky feels dazed when Buck pulls back still panting into his mouth, "Buck-"

"Shh, just reminding you why you gotta stay alive," Buck's hand finds John's erection and starts to stroke him. John lets out a long slow breath, Buck's hand keeps touching him, and it sends an electric shock through him. It had been so long since anyone touched him, it'd been so long since he'd had the touch he really wanted.

He loses himself for a moment and a low moan starts to leave his mouth but Buck presses their lips together capturing the sound. He can feel himself getting close, the pressure before the release. He's trying to be quiet, he's trying to be still, but Buck's hands on him are driving him wild. This is such a stupid idea with hundreds of men sleeping next to them, but Bucky can't seem to care when Buck's tongue is in his mouth and his hand down his pants.

Buck moves away to let him breathe, but when Bucky sees Buck, just barely in the darkness, staring at him, arousal clear on his face, it sends him over the edge. Buck grabs the back of Buck's head and buries it into his shoulder, and it's a good thing, it muffles his moans and keeps them from being discovered.

He can feel himself releasing into Buck's hand, and Buck's hot breath in his ear, "That's right, let go, darlin'."

He stays pressed against Buck's shoulder panting for what feels like forever, but after a while, Buck withdraws his hand from Bucky's pants and wipes his hand on the threadbare blanket they share.

Bucky moves his hand to help Gale, he can feel his hardness pressed against his thigh and he wants nothing more than to feel Buck moan in his mouth as he comes, but Buck grabs his hand, stopping its journey downward.

He rolls back slightly as he kisses John's knuckles, "Don't do anything stupid, Bucky. Promise me."

"Wasn't gunna do anything you didn't just do," Bucky jokes.

But Buck still looks serious, "Both of us John. You're not sacrificin' yourself. Promise me. "

He won't lie, "I can't."

Buck grabs the sides of his face and kisses him hard. Bucky can see him squeeze his eyes shut, "I can't lose you, Bucky, I can't. Don't do something stupid that makes me lose you. I couldn't bear it."

Buck leans forward, kissing him tenderly, pulling their bodies closer together.

Bucky's never heard Buck sound so fierce, so earnest before, but Bucky can't promise what Buck is asking for. He'll always choose Gale.

So he pivots and hopes that Buck doesn't notice, "Then we both best promise to stay alive, 'cause I'm no good without you."

"If anyone's left it's gonna be me and you."

Bucky presses a kiss to Buck's lips, "Me and you, Buck. Me and you."

They start a night march fifteen days later, Lieutenant Colonel Carter

and the rest of the officers have been asking to avoid night marches but they only have so much negotiating power. They settle for only marching 20 kilometers a night, it's a small victory, but it ultimately doesn't serve them how they hoped.

Bucky's trying to convince Gale to escape when P-51 buzzes over them and shoots at the march.

The bullets tear through the men and the guards alike. Men are frantically trying to douse their touches and cigarettes. The plane flies away and he sees that Gale is okay, but instead of relief flooding through him, he only feels anger.

The last thing he's holding onto in this cold horrible, death march is Gale. If anything happens to Gale, he'll give up, he'll take down as many Krauts as he can, he'll go down swinging, but he'll go down. If there is no Buck, there is no him.

He screams every bit of fear and anger into Glimnetz's face. These stupid bastards are going to get them all killed. Somewhere, far away he hears, "Bucky, calm down!"

Bucky can't calm down, he won't, he wants to tear these bastards apart for putting the one thing he loves in danger.

Strong hands grip his shoulders, turning him around, "John! Look at me!"

He fights them, pulling away from Buck. He wants violence, he wants to feel his knuckles break on Glimnetz's cheekbones, but he won't hurt Buck.

"Look at me!" Buck's hands grab the side of his hand forcing him to meet Bucky's eyes, "Look at me. I’m in. We make a run for it tonight. Now calm down before they put a bullet in your head."

There is a certain frenzy in Buck's eyes, the hands on his face are gentle, but it's forced like he's stopping himself from digging his fingers in as hard as he can. Bucky wants to kiss him with the wild way Buck is looking into his eyes. But he can't, they can't, so he presses his lips together as hard as he can, and nods.

They start back on the march, leaving the dead on the road, tending to the injured men as much as their limited supplies will allow and Buck and George go hard on the planning, but there is still so much they don't know. Bucky falls back to Alex's group to confirm what he

remembers of the map, Bucky has always had a head for maps, but Alex's mind for navigation was unmatched by anyone he'd ever met.

Alex opens his journal to a random page, to anyone else it would have looked like a beautiful dusk landscape, dotted with fireflies and trees. But once he pointed to a specific line, Bucky could see that it was a map of Germany with placements of where they had been and where they were headed. Genius.

He motions with his pen, "I'm thinking we'll stop here, there's a forest, here, to the northwest, should give you boys the cover you need. I hope you make it."

Bucky smiles and wishes Alex was coming with them, but they have to keep the group small, "Thanks, but what about you? The commotion caused by us might give you the cover you need to get out too."

Alex looks over at Macon and Daniels, "Can't. Macon's still not well enough to run. We have to wait it out," Alex sways into Bucky giving him a friendly bump, "He's my best friend, I can't just leave him here."

"I can understand that," He sighs, "Finally got Buck to agree to go, took him long enough."

Alex places the journal back in his coat, "I'm rooting for you, don't forget where we are after you get out."

Clasping his hand on Alex's back, "Thanks, Alex. We'll make sure we come back for you."

Bucky makes his way back up to Buck and the group, they're just starting to enter a town, it's chaos. The prisoners are trying to force their way into homes, and the guards are doing their best to hold them back. It's the best chance they're gonna get.

"According to Jefferson’s map, there’s a forest a few miles northwest." Bucky provides, motioning in the direction of the woods.

"If we make it that far, we should be pretty well covered." George, ever the worry wart, says.

Bucky doesn't have time for his dour attitude, "Oh, we’ll make it that far."

"I say we head down that way, take advantage of the confusion while

we still can." Buck, is finally on board and he's like a dog with a bone. Once he has his mind set on something nothing will deter him from it, and this is the Buck he's been missing in the Stalag, "Over that wall."

"All right. Who wants to go first?" Bucky hopes Buck will volunteer but he knows better, Buck will hold out until the end.

The clamoring grows and the guards lose focus of the rest of the group, trying to calm down the villagers and the prisoners.

"I'll go," George says and starts walking casually toward the wall.

"All right, Bill. Go." Buck gets Bill to start going towards the wall, Buck then looks at Bucky he knows Buck is going to try to make him go next, "All right-"

Bucky cuts him off, he leverages the fact that they don't have the time to argue, "Get going. I'm right behind you."

"All right." Buck is obviously displeased, but he knows they can't argue about it so he starts to move towards the wall.

Bucky keeps an eye on the guards and on Buck, easier said than done, the crowd is starting to calm. Bucky has to make his move now.

He turns to start his escape then he hears, "Halt! Halt!"

Bucky whips around and sees the German guard pointing his gun at Buck, not him. "Hey, hey, don't shoot! Don't shoot!"

He tries to wrestle the gun out of the guard's grip, and the rifle goes off into the air, he thinks, he hopes, "Go, Buck! Get out of here!"

All he can hope is Buck listened to him, he knows that Buck would likely turn around, but he hopes he didn't come back. He's not as strong as he used to be, the poor food, the march, the time in the Stalag weakened him and before he knows it he's on his knees with a gun at his head. He doesn't like the precedent this is starting to set.

He hears other guards going to the wall, firing off rounds and all he can hope is they don't hit Buck, that he's already too far away to be seen in the dark.

The rifle cocks next to his head, well, he thinks, at least Buck is safe.

"Release that man. Now." Lt. Col. Clark's voice pierces through the throbbing in his head and he breathes a sigh of relief, as much as he

was happy Buck got out, he wasn't ready to die, not anymore.

"Let him go." Clark says again, when the guard doesn't remove the rifle from his head, "Goddamn it. You touch one hair on his head, and you'll have a riot."

A pause.

"Glemnitz. This is one of my senior officers, and he is essential to–" Clark is losing his cool, Bucky's not sure he's ever heard that before, "Sergeant, order your man to release Major Egan." His voice drops another octave, "Now."

The guard releases him, and it seems, at least for the moment that there won't be any repercussions for his escape attempt. Small victories he supposes.

Lt. Col. Clark crosses his arms and squares with Bucky, "The hell was that all about?"

Bucky brushes off his pants, "Buck just went over that wall."

Clark nods, "Good for him."

After the escape attempt, he links up with the rest of the Hundredth and by extension, the Red Tails. The two groups and grown closer since their time in the barracks in Stalag Luft III and he is happy that they have.

While he loves Crank, Demarco, and Brady, Alexander Jefferson is one of the few who really seems to *get* him. He's not sure in what way, but there is an effortlessness in their interactions that is only superseded by his interactions with Buck.

He tries not to think about Buck, but it's nearly impossible. What could have happened to him. Bucky has to believe he made it, that he found a group of Americans who'll make him a spam sandwich and send him home.

They march for days, deeper and deeper into Germany, they cross the Danube and he knows now that the only way he's getting out of here is when the Soviets or the Americans reach them. When they reach the Next Stalag the Nazis don't even bother to process them. Several other groups had escaped in the night or been shot trying. The Nazis didn't seem to want to know how many of them were still left and that was

just fine with him.

There are thousands of soldiers here, not just Americans, but Indian troops, Soviets, South Africans, and soldiers from all over. This must be the last camp standing, and he hopes it's not for much longer.

The food is often short, with no aid packages coming in from the Red Cross, so they're all going hungry. Sickness is rampant throughout the camp, it's too overcrowded for it not to be, and the only small mercy is that the weather in Germany is at least warm enough that they're not all freezing to death.

Bucky's not sure how much longer they can last like this. There are radios in the camp, the guards either don't know about them or don't care enough to confiscate them, but the news keeps saying that the Soviets and Americans are pushing forward, squeezing the Germans from both sides.

He just hopes someone gets there soon.

It's night, and the guards don't even really bother to enforce lights out anymore, he and Alex are sitting outside their tent. Many of the men have managed to fall asleep but over a hundred men in each tent make for a stinky, sweaty experience, so even though the night air sends a chill down his spine Bucky would rather be here.

"Bombers moon," Alex says pointing up at the sky, the moon is full and bright in the cloudless sky.

Bucky lets out a dry laugh, "Let's hope so, maybe we can still get out of here before we're old and gray."

Alex scoffs, sketching something in the small notebook he has.

They sit in silence, Bucky doesn't lean over and look at what Alex is drawing, most times it's a pinup for someone or a plane he's seen. And if it's not, well, it's none of Bucky's business anyway.

Then hears a rip, and Alex is holding a folded piece of paper between his fingers.

Bucky eyes the paper warily, "I didn't ask you to draw me anything."

"I know," He shakes the paper at him. "I took a chance."

He doesn't know why, but he feels like Alex sees right through him,

sees all the parts he tries to cover and he's not sure how he feels about that.

Against his better judgment, he takes the paper and unfolds it. It's a picture of him and Buck. He's looking off the page, laughing at something (probably something that he said) and Buck is looking at him, a soft smile across his features, hand reaching toward his arm, fingers just barely touching the arm of his jacket.

He's seen that look on Buck's face before, but it's never been directed at him. It was one usually reserved for Marge, and Marge alone.

Bucky's throat constricts. He'd been trying not to think about Buck and through doing so, has pretty much *only* thought of him.

Bucky clears his throat, trying to break up the emotions that all seem to be caught there, "Why do you think I'd want this?"

They both know it's a front and a bad one at that.

Alex bumps his shoulder, "I drew everyone else's sweetheart, thought maybe you'd want yours."

There's no judgment in Alex's voice, not a single drop of hate, or disgust, just quiet support. He sees what Bucky is and he doesn't care. Bucky's only known Alex for a few months but this small act has secured Bucky's friendship for life.

A small sad laugh breaks through his throat, "Sweetheart implies they feel the same way. Not sure that's the case here "

The men are asleep, and they are alone, and whispering, but he still has to be careful, this conversation is dangerous.

Alex leans to the side again and flicks the paper lightly, "I wouldn't be so sure, I just draw what I see."

He looks at Buck's face again, with soft eyes, and a small smile. Smitten.

When he speaks, his words catch. "Thanks, Alex."

It's early spring when their camp is liberated by the 14th Armored Division, Bucky's never been happier to hear tanks and fighters in his life, even if it means the Germans start firing at them when they realize they won't do any damage to the incoming forces. Some of the

men panic, but most snap back into being the soldiers they were trained to be.

Bucky directs some of the men to take the tower, many of the men are overwhelming and killing the guards. The prisoners outnumbered the guards by so many that the only thing keeping the peace was that the prisoners wanted as many people to make it out alive as possible, now that that small hope was off the table, the prisoners were out to take out as many of the guards as they could. They were taking back the camp, all that was left to do now was to let the rescuing forces know that they had, otherwise, they were just as likely to be killed by their own men as they were by the Germans.

Bucky tags Alex, ducking and running through the chaos looking for a flag. He's starting to lose hope when he keeps being told 'No' whenever he asks, but then he hears Jefferson yell, "Major! I've got it!"

The handoff is quick, Bucky takes the flag, torn and shredded and threadbare, worn soft through ware, and runs toward the command hut. He doesn't think about the climb or the bullets that whiz past him as he does it, he just climbs as fast as he can. His arms are burning and splinters are digging into his hand, but he eventually reaches the top.

The men cheer as he tosses the Nazi flag down and hoists up the American flag. The fighting has died down, most of the guards are captured or killed and there is a crown beneath him. He wants to cry suddenly, relief surging through his body like a flood, but he holds to the flag pole as hard as he can and pushes his forehead against the rough wood. The pain helps him control his emotions, he can't let himself feel it. Not yet.

He watches the surrender with Alex, who grabs his shoulder and shakes him, "I'll bet you a dollar, Major, that they ship us out of Marseille."

Bucky laughs, "Oh, that's a bet I'll take. It's definitely gonna be Le Havre."

But it doesn't really matter, he's going to go back to Thorpe Abbotts. He needs to know what happened to Buck. He needs to see if they both make it out of the war or if neither of them do.

Chapter End Notes

Only two chapters after this! I can't believe we're almost done!

Find me tumblin' Here

Thorpe Abbotts

Chapter Summary

Bucky makes it out of the stalag, but not everything is smooth sailing.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is mean and I am so sorry.

Please remember it's angst with a happy ending.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After the Camp is liberated they try to send him back to America, but he digs in his heels until they agree to send him back to Thorpe Abbotts. He doesn't have to put up that much of a fight, it was surprising how many men wanted to go back to their bases, their regiments, how many of them still wanted to fight in this war until it was good and finished.

He ends up getting picked up by some recruit he's never met, who lands a bit too uneven for his liking. He asks if Buck made it back and the kid has the audacity to ask, "Who?'

The reply eats at him. It means one of two things, the kid's an idiot and doesn't know a good thing when he sees one, or that Buck didn't make it to Thorpe Abbotts. His mind swirls thinking about the latter, he tries to think of the good possibilities- Buck just went home to the States, Buck's still trying to secure transit, Buck had just ended up with another group. But the bad possibilities that he can't keep out of his brain- was Buck recaptured? Is he still out there, hiding from the Germans? Is he dead?

He chews his lip, pulling the flakes of skin off until he tastes blood, he hadn't realized he was doing it, but the pain distracts him. Makes it so he doesn't slam his fist into the side of the plane, or worse, start crying. The flight is long and he tries to sleep, but his mind won't stop, he's so close to finding out what happened. He knows deep down, that Buck is alive, feels it at his very core just like he did after Buck went down. He knows, but he still worries.

When they land, he starts to move to the doors, it doesn't matter that the plan hasn't stopped, he needs off this bucket of bolts as soon as

possible and tears into the exit hatch. The pilot whose name he never bothered to learn yells back at him to 'calm the fuck down'. Bucky ignores him and drops to the ground the moment it's (barely) safe enough to do so.

He walks towards the officer's mess, long legs covering the ground as quickly as he can when Jack pulls up beside him in a Jeep, still as lanky limbed and annoyed as the day Bucky left him, "Where're you on a rampage to?"

"Where's Buck?" It's the only question that matters.

Jack rolls his eyes and throws open the door for him. He leans back and levels Bucky with a flat stare, "Hey Bucky, good to see you. I'm doing great thanks for asking."

"Please." Bucky's never been one to beg, but he won't be a proud man, not today, he just needs to know.

Jack sighs and pats the seat, "Buck's fine. He's on a mission. Now get in the damn Jeep."

Bucky starts to follow the order without thinking, "What do you mean on a mission?"

The shocks of fear course through him. To learn that Buck was here, only to hear he was on a mission, Bucky could lose him again before he even got him back, if that happened he wouldn't survive it.

"It's a milk run," Jack must see something on his face, "Promise. Dutch are starving and we're dropping food, no flak, no fighters. Just a Mercy Mission."

Bucky lets out a shuddering sigh and reaches his hand over grabs Jack's shoulder and squeezes, "Thanks, Jack. I am glad to see you."

Jack shakes off his hand and starts toward the barracks, "You two are just as bad as each other, Jesus. Let's get you cleaned up, you look like shit."

Bucky laughs. "I'll bet."

It feels weird being back after all those months away, the smell of the army laundry detergent, the astringent smell of the cleanser on the floor. His foot locker is by his bunk, and his bunk is next to Buck's. He

wouldn't have known it was Buck's, it looks like all the other Bunks, with sharp corners, and tight tucks on the blankets, but on the nightstand next to the bed, there is a picture of Marge. Seeing it beside the bed feels like a punch to the chest, his hand reaches into the pocket and worries the soft corner of the drawing Alex gave him.

He tries to put it out of his mind.

He heads to the showers to clean up, the water is lukewarm but it's the best damn shower he's ever had in his life. He scrubs himself down two, three, four times before he starts to feel clean, and starts to see the water at his feet turn totally clear. No one is enforcing showering times on him today and it must be an hour before he finally gets out.

It's odd going through his foot locker, he remembers all the things that are there, but now they feel like they belong to someone else. His aftershave that's all but dried up in the bottle, his pomade which is somehow still good, and the smattering of knickknacks he collected like a magpie- Tommy's winning dart that had missed his eyes and hit the apple, a tiny decorative spoon that Curt gave him after he'd returned from Scotland, his Fez from Algeria. A thousand things from another life.

It feels like going through a stranger's belongings. But he tries to put himself back together. To put the old Bucky back together. He styles his hair, shaves, puts on *clean* clothes, and dammit if he doesn't almost feel like a human being again. It'll have to do.

According to Jack's time timeline, Buck should be back soon so he heads over to the Comms tower and convinces them to let him be the one to give the landing instructions. It doesn't actually take much convincing, but he waits, drumming his fingers on the counter, rolling the chair out and in from under the transponder, he's full of nervous energy. After months of wondering what happened to Buck after he went over that wall, he'll finally see Buck, alive and whole.

When he hears Buck's voice over the radio he almost can't believe it.

It doesn't seem like Buck does either, "Clearup Tower, please repeat. Over."

The smile that breaks over his face almost hurts, "Oh, you heard me the first goddamn time, Gale."

He steals a Jeep and drives next to Gale as he taxis down the tarmac, Buck lowers the window, and goddammit if Buck's face isn't the most

beautiful thing he's ever seen. He's elated, giggling like a schoolgirl, and Buck's laughing too, the relief clear on his face.

Croz, Rosie, and Lemmons are all on board and he's happy to see them too. He shakes hands and clasps shoulders congratulating them all on making it through the war, but they all know why he's really here and they group together and mill about the Jeep as Gale deboards.

Bucks strides up to him and hugs him so hard it knocks the breath outta him, "I'm okay, Gale, I'm okay."

Gale just squeezes tighter, whispering fiercely into his jacket, "You stupid asshole, I told you not to do anything stupid. I told you-"

"Not to get myself killed, and I didn't."

They've been holding onto each other too long, so they pull back.

Buck's hand comes to rest on his shoulder, propelling him towards the base, "We gotta get you sumthin' to eat, you're skin and bones, John."

But after that Buck pushes him away, it's weird, he's not cold to him, hell most people wouldn't even notice the change, but he can *feel* it.

He recoups at the base and even flies a few aid missions himself. It feels nice to be flying again, dropping food instead of bombs. It feels right to have Gale in the left seat, but there is a distance there. A distance that, no matter how hard he tries, he can't seem to bridge.

Buck keeps it professional, friendly, but not close. Buck even makes it a little awkward at times, making the extra effort to stand on the other side of Croz or Rosie. Even going to bed before or after John to make sure he can't talk to him then, making sure that he's never alone with Bucky, never giving him the opportunity to bring it up. He slides out of the arms thrown around his shoulder And gets in the Jeep with Rosie instead of him after a mission.

It hurts, like the constant claw of hunger in his belly. So after a while, he stops trying and just lets it happen.

He starts to doubt everything that happened in the Stalag really happened. Maybe his wounds were much worse than he thought and he'd dreamed the whole thing, or maybe the Stalag *had* actually driven him insane. Buck never kissed him in the library. He'd never told him that he wanted the same things John did. Those were all

moments his mind manufactured to keep him going.

He almost has himself convinced, and then he pulls out the picture Alex had drawn him. Buck's warm gaze on him, fingers just barely touching his jacket.

He remembers Alex saying. *I only draw what I see.* And hopes it's true.

So if all of it did happen, what the hell was going on now?

He and Buck had always traded support, when Buck needed time and space Bucky made it for him. Whenever Bucky started to fall, Gale was there to pick him up. Whenever one of them lost hope the other provided it.

And maybe that's all it was. Gale was just using Bucky's feelings for him to give him a reason to survive. Making sure he didn't get himself killed in his darker moments. Gale gave him something to hold onto after he'd lost all hope. And looking back, it *was* the only thing that kept him going.

The more he thinks about it, the more he thinks it might be true. He knew one thing, Buck would do anything for him. And maybe that's all it was- Buck, doing everything and anything to keep him alive. Up to and including ensuring his survival through any means necessary. Which apparently included kissing the life out of him and reaching into his pants in the dark hours of the morning in a run-down Stalag.

A small voice inside him screams that he's wrong, Buck *does* feel something for him. He has to.

And it's that little voice that makes him do what he does next.

Buck never lets himself be cornered and Bucky knows he avoiding him. And Buck is clever, but Bucky's resourceful and he finally gets him alone in the equipment room.

Rosie, Croz, and Buck come in to drop off their equipment and he knows Buck will be the last one to leave. Always making sure his flight equipment is folded and sorted just so, carefully placing each piece in its proper place. Bucky has made fun of Gale numerous times for his meticulousness but secretly he'd always loved the moments when it was just the two of them after a mission.

Croz and Rosie leave and Bucky steps out from where he had been

waiting, definitely waiting, not hiding, "Hey Buck."

Buck startles, "Bucky, wha-

"Why are you avoiding me?" No use in beating around the bush.

Buck sighs, "I'm not avoiding you."

"Bullshit," Bucky takes another step closer, "You've barely looked me in the eye since I got back."

Buck turns pinning him with his blazing blue gaze, "There, ya happy?"

"No." Bucky can see that there is something different behind his eyes, "Not really."

Buck is frustrated and John doesn't know why, but he's frustrated too.

That's a lie, he wants to pretend like he doesn't know, but he's experienced this before. That night all those years ago after the hotel. It hurts more than he thought it would, "So is this gonna be like the last time? You just gonna tell me it never should've happened? You gonna go home to *Marge*?"

It's petty. But he feels petty, and angry, and hurt.

Buck looks away and stays silent, the muscle in his jaw jumping, and it speaks volumes.

"So that's how you wanna leave it? Fine," John starts to turn to walk away, he's done being jerked around.

Buck lets out a heavy, frustrated sigh, "What do you want from me, John?"

He spins on a dime, shoving his finger into Buck's chest, "What do I want from you?! You said you needed me. You said you wanted to try. You said you wanted-"

"John." The way Buck says his name breaks down his resolve just a little more, it almost sounds like Buck is in as much pain as he is. But he can't take the hope that keeps flickering in his chest. He wants to smother it. Extinguish that little flame that tells him he could be happy. He just wants it done with. He doesn't wanna feel a thing.

His hand falls and Buck's eyes dart to his. It was an unspoken agreement that they didn't talk about this stuff, but he can't take

anymore. They are or they aren't, he just needs to know.

"I can't-" Bucky's voice breaks and he takes a deep breath trying to control the shuddering in his voice. When he speaks next it's more controlled, more heartbroken than he ever wanted to betray, "It's obvious what I feel for you, it has to be. But you keep giving me these moments where I think you feel the same and then-"

"Bucky, I'm not trying to make it harder-" Buck is grasping for things to say.

Bucky doesn't want to hear it, "You want me or you don't." Buck looks away quickly, down at his feet. "If you do, we'll figure this out, whatever it takes. But if you don't-" And God, he hopes Buck will stop him but the interruption never comes, "-I'll never bring it up again, It'll be finished. I'll be your best man. I'll show up at your family barbeques. I'll do it all. Whatever you want. But I have to know, Gale, I have to know."

For a long time, he's been struggling to stay up, been trying to keep the dark pit underneath from swallowing him, but he doesn't know why it matters anymore. Buck doesn't want this. Doesn't want him. He's made that much obvious, Buck won't even look at him now. Bucky knows he's always been easy to leave.

Buck is still frozen in front of him. There. That's his answer.

But now that he has his answer, it just pisses him off again. He thought he'd feel sadness, devastation, and he does, but his anger catches him off guard, "Every fuckin word is like pulling teeth with you! What you can't even talk to me now? Is that it?" He shoves Buck back, and Buck stumbles, so he pushes again, "Can't even look at me now, huh?"

He starts to walk away, go find an isolated corner where he can crumble into himself in peace. But he's barely a step away from Buck when he's pulled back and slammed into the equipment rack behind them, sending flight gear and oxygen masks clattering to the floor.

"God damn you, John Egan!" Buck's hands are fisted in his shirt, it reminds him of the day in the library, distantly, he hopes it turns out the same.

Bucky lets out a sad laugh, "Oh, he already has, believe me."

Buck clenches his jaw and slowly, unclenches his hands from Bucky's

shirt.

Bucky puts on a smile, it feels like a snarl, "It's all right, Buck. I know why you did it. Hell, one day, I might even appreciate it," he pats Buck on the shoulder as he passes. Buck doesn't stop him this time. "Don't worry, this won't change anything. It'll be just like old times."

He walks away, and with every step he takes he feels the fractures in his heart spread, if he lets it crumble, maybe he can scatter the pieces, cast them out, and let the wind carry them so far away that he never has to feel anything again.

After his confrontation with Buck, he goes to the officer's club, it's empty, so he helps himself to a bottle of whiskey.

The base is mostly cleared out and now that the Allies are deep into Germany, there aren't any bombing missions left to run. The P-51's have taken over the fighting, any bombers would just as likely kill their men as hit the target, so many of the newer recruits are already headed to other bases or secured transport over to the Pacific. The war might be winding down in Europe, but it was still raging in the East.

He doesn't bother to turn any of the lights on, instead, opting to sit alone, wallowing in the dim glow of the emergency lights. It's calming in a way to finally be alone after so many months of constant company. But then he hears the door click and for a stupid, hopeful moment he thinks it might be Buck.

It's not.

Jack Kidd finds him, he can tell by his tall, willowy silhouette in the doorway, he walks through the room like he has a million times before and leans against the bar, leaving a stool between them. Jack had always left a healthy distance between them like Bucky was a bomb that could go off at any moment. He supposed Jack isn't entirely wrong about that.

"Not even going to use a glass?" Jack asks.

Bucky takes another swig directly from the bottle, "I figure after everything we've been through, the army can at least let me have a bottle of whiskey."

Jack reaches across, grabbing the bottle and taking a sip, "I suppose that's fair."

They stay there in the dark. Bucky doesn't know why Jack's here, they had always butted heads. Jack had always resented Bucky for getting him put as Air Exec. The man wanted to fly and Bucky couldn't blame him for that, but Jack was *good* at taking care of the men. They respected his no-nonsense attitude and there wasn't a damn thing the Hundredth could have wanted for that Jack didn't do his damnedest to get them.

He had always been the better choice for Air Exec and they both knew it. Even if it did stick in Jack's craw.

"So what the hell is going on between you and Buck?" Jack asks, sliding the bottle back towards him.

He lies, "Not a goddamn thing."

It surprises him that Jack noticed, that anyone had noticed, but then he feels dumb. *Of course* people had noticed. Buck had been keeping a minimum of three feet of space between them like the order had been handed down from President Truman himself.

But Jack Kidd has never had any time for anyone's bullshit, especially not his.

"Don't give me that. In '43, you two disappear within days of one another. And for a while, the whole attitude of the base wasn't dictated by you two assholes. Now you've only been back together for a few days and all anyone can talk about it's why you two are acting like a couple of catty school kids."

Bucky doesn't bother to respond. What is he even supposed to say to that? 'Well Jack, you see, I fell in love with Buck and to keep me alive he told me he felt the same. But now that we're safe again, he's ashamed of what we did and can't stand to be around me.' He's sure that wouldn't play well, so he just starts to peel the wrapper from the whisky bottle in his hand.

Jack sighs, again, looking like he's debating leaving or staying. He must decide to stay because he says, ' Y'know, I found Buck in here. Same as you after he got back. No bottle, but he did have a glass of whiskey in front of him."

He can only scoff, Jack's pulling his leg, "That's a lie. Buck doesn't drink."

"Never said he drank it, but I think he was thinking about it."

Bucky thinks he might continue but after a pregnant pause, Bucky looks at Jack and shakes his head, "So?"

"So," Jack continues, annoyance clear in his tone, "I think it was a near thing, I walked in and he slid it over to me instead. You know Buck, he doesn't say much, but I think he felt guilty about leaving you behind."

"He shouldn't I told him to, it was more important he gets out anyway."

Kidd sighs, "Don't think he saw it that way. Just some food for thought."

"Well, you know Buck, goddamn honorable asshole through and through, wouldn't have sat right now matter who it was."

Jack sighs again, fed up, "When Buck first got back he yelled, and I mean *yelled*, at the CO. He muscled his way into the intelligence room and demanded they give him the troop locations and status of Stalags. I was worried he was gonna get court-martialed for his behavior, but Croz talked the CO down. We tried to get him to go to the sick bay and get checked out, but he still wouldn't do nothing until he had all the info we could give him. Specifically about you, which wasn't much."

Bucky laughs, mirthless, "Now I *know* you're making that up."

"Hand to god, swung his dick around like he was a goddamn Colonel."

It's hard to imagine Buck throwing a tantrum like that, that's usually his MO. He sighs, that stupid glimmer of hope flickers in his chest, "Why you telling me this?"

Jack looks at him like he's particularly stupid, "'Cause whatever is going on between you and Buck, can't be bad enough to break a friendship like that."

He takes a drink and it burns, "I wish people would stop telling me what they think me and Buck are."

"Don't be stupid, Bucky."

Bucky bristles, "And why do you assume I'm the one being stupid"

"You usually are."

It's fair, but Bucky is still pissed about it, still annoyed by the whole situation. He takes another, longer, drink and bangs the bottle back on the bar, "Well for once, Jack, it ain't me. For once, I tried to fix it, but that son of a bitch can't even stand to be in the same room with me."

Jack knocks the counter twice with his knuckle, "I guess, given how you're sulking, that might be true."

Bucky scoffs, the whiskey is warming his cheeks and making him feel loose, "I'm not sulking."

"No?" Jack looks around the dark room, "Sure as hell looks like it."

"Well, I'm not." He says, "And even if I was you can't do nothing about it."

It's a childish response but Jack always seems to bring out the immaturity in him. Like an older brother who was always begrudgingly taking care of him.

"Well," Jack narrows his eyes, "I outrank you now, so I actually can."

Bucky takes another drink out of the bottle and pushes it toward Jack, "You gonna write me up, *Lieutenant Colonel*?"

A smile finally breaks over Jack's face, they're a rare thing, but Bucky is happy to see it, "Not today. Doesn't seem like you're the one who deserves the kick in the ass."

A day later, Bucky rides into town, his bike is gone, but there are so few people left at the base that he doesn't have to fight for one.

The pub is just as he remembers it, he has to duck to enter, and his hair brushes the low ceiling as he walks. It's dark and warm and it's too early in the day for it to be crowded, so he sits at the bar and asks for a whiskey.

It's been so long since he drank, real, good whiskey and he sips it slowly. As much as he'd been a drinker before his time in the Stalags, over a year without anything had tanked his tolerance. His conversation with Jack yesterday was enough to put him on his ass, and he's not looking to do that again.

Buck had always been on him about his drinking, it had always been a way to cope with his fickle emotions, but now it doesn't seem to be

helping. He likes the taste, but it doesn't dull the sadness that sits in his stomach.

"Bucky?"

He turns around on his stool to see Tommy, all but throwing his bin full of dishes onto the bar and throwing his arms around Bucky and squeezing for all he's worth.

The hug knocks the air out of him, but he reaches around Tommy's small frame and squeezes back, "Hey kid, it's good to see you."

Tommy's embrace tightens even more, he can hear him sniffling into his shirt, the shuddering breaths he's taking, "They told me you got shot down. They said you were gone."

A sob chokes off Tommy's last word and any control Buck had thought he had comes crashing down. Tears well up in his eyes and he has to clear his throat before he can form words, "I know, Tommy. I'm sorry. But I'm okay. I'm okay."

This poor kid, he'd managed to worm his way into the heart of almost every man on the base and they'd found their way into his, but they were a short-lived bunch, and he could see the toll their deaths took on him. But before any man of the Hundredth ever arrived, he and Tommy were playing darts and racing bikes down the uneven cobblestone streets.

Bucky pulls back, wiping the tears off Tommy's face, "Hey kid, no need for tears, I'm home safe, Buck too."

His words are watery and his eyes are glassy and he couldn't hide a damn thing from Tommy. The kid lets out wet laughs and wipes a tear away from the corner of his eye. It's more of a poke, a good-natured jab, "Then what are these, Major?"

For the first time in a long time, the smile that splits his race is real, he feels actual joy at seeing an old friend, it's been too long. Buck pushes his fringe back and places a messy kiss there, "Just missed you is all, you're the little brother I never had."

He can see the pride in the kid's face at his words. Even if he tries to play off cool, "You could be so lucky."

He buys Tommy a Coke and they catch up. Lemmons has been teaching Tommy basic mechanics and Tommy's been picking it up

quick, fixing tractors and cars for the locals, even helping on a few planes now and then.

Bucky will have to remember to thank Lemmons for raking Tommy under his wing. The two just fit as friends, two sweethearts without a bad bone in their entire body.

Tommy's telling him the town gossip when Buck comes in and sees Tommy and Bucky at the bar.

"Tommy!" Buck calls in that gravelly revelry of his, clasping Tommy on the back, "Lemmons told me you helped fix up the last fort I took out, flew like a dream Tommy."

Tommy throws up a salute, "Nothing but the best for you, Major."

Buck laughs, and Bucky can hear the warmth in it, "I hate to break this up, but I was wondering if I could steal Bucky for a moment."

Tommy slides off the stool, "Sure thing." He looks like he's going to just walk away, but he throws his arms around Buck, giving him the same death squeeze he'd given Bucky. "I'm glad you're back, Major Cleven."

Buck returns the hug. Resting his head on top of Tommy's head, "Missed you too, Buddy."

They pull apart and Bucky can see the wetness in Tommy's eyes, Bucky just wants to hug him again, but Tommy just grabs his dish bin off the counter and heads into the back with a, "See you later."

Buck slides onto the stool Tommy had just vacated and presses his shoulder into Bucky's, "He's a good kid."

Bucky hums taking another sip of his whiskey, "The best."

He's surprised, after their fight he thought Buck would continue to keep his distance, but Buck just points to John's glass, letting the bartender know to get him another one.

It's as close to an apology as he's gonna get.

He stares into his mostly empty glass, "Who told you I was here, Buck?"

"Jack."

Bucky scoffs into his whiskey. It figured that Jack would go berate Buck after he'd berated John. He wonders what Jack might've said to him. It wasn't often that anyone ever tried to put Buck in his place, mostly cause he'd never needed to be.

He sits in silence, it's not Bucky's job to break it. He had already put himself out there for Buck to crush under his heel and he wouldn't be doing it again. Anything Buck had to say was up to Buck now.

Buck drops his head a bit, "Are we okay, Bucky?"

He sounded scared like Bucky might say no, but Bucky wasn't gonna be stupid, he knew that no matter how many times Buck came back to him he'd always give in, "'Course we are."

Buck takes a few deep breaths like he trying to control his breathing. The refill comes, the bartender goes, and Buck opens his mouth to say something. But there's no use in talking about it anymore so Bucky cuts him off, "Got a mission tomorrow, more food for the Dutch, could use a co-pilot."

He takes a long drag of his whiskey and finally looks at Buck.

He looks unsure, but Buck's lips curl into a hesitant smile, "Only if the left seats open."

Bucky looks at him feigning confusion, "I was thinking more copilot in reserve, you'd be in the back with Croz. That way we can drop you out with the food if the fort's too heavy."

Buck's smile turns more genuine and says- "I deserve that." -as he laughs.

Buckuy snorts into his glass, "You do."

They bump shoulders again. They're okay. They'll be okay.

Bucky downs his new whiskey and sets down his empty glass, "See you at 0800."

He clasps Buck on the back and leaves for the bunks. They're okay, but it still hurts to be around Buck right now. He'll be okay in the morning.

The war ends on May 8th, 1945 and Bucky thought the day would never come.

That night he and Buck sit alone in the flight tower. The light of the flares blazing and falling through the skies. Most of the men are drinking and merrymaking in the dance hall. But that's not him anymore. Bucky doesn't feel quite the same, not after everything. But Buck is there with him sitting at his side, as he should be, as he always has been.

It's the only thing he wants, Buck at his side, for as long as he can have him. He can be content with this. He has no other choice.

They leave for the States soon and then it's all over. Part of him is relieved, part of him wishes they could stay at Thorpe Abbotts forever. All of him knows that once they reach stateside everything will change. Buck will go to Wyoming, he'll go to Wisconsin and the constant presence of Buck at his side will disappear.

So for now, he's gonna spend tonight sitting next to the man he loves. Too chicken shit to say anything and too desperate to do anything but sit beside him.

He's a coward. But Buck is too.

"You know," Gale takes a deep breath, "We both have to go home."

Bucky sniffs, twisting his mouth, "Yeah, Buck, I know."

"It won't be the last time we see each other." Gale is trying to comfort him, like a child who found out that Santa doesn't exist. Trying to soothe the loss of something important that was never actually real. He tries again, "Wyoming's not that far."

Bucky can't go to Wyoming, not yet. Maybe someday, but not soon. He can't go and see Buck living in domestic bliss with Marge. Can't look at the life he lives loving someone else. "Neither is Manitowoc. Ya know."

Buck hums, and the silence between them returns. He won't bring up what Buck said about wanting to try again, he knows where that leads. He knows that they were both half out of their minds and that Buck would have said anything to keep him going. That's what happens to things that grow in darkness, they never learn to survive the light.

He wants to be bitter, he wants to be, but he can't. He would take every second he got with Gale, he always knew they would be fleeting, to be bitter would cheapen those moments. What they had.

What they currently have. He'll take anything, as long as he has Gale. Even in just a small way.

The flares rise up and burn out sending steaks of color through the sky. Greens and yellows and reds so bright that they almost hurt his eyes in the moonless night. Bright enough to make his eyes well up with tears. He takes a long pull from his flask and wordlessly holds it out to Gale.

He's not sure why he does it. Gale hasn't drank a drop in the entire time he's known him. Maybe it's Jack's story. But there's a feeling that he just can't shake that, at least tonight, Buck needs a drink as much as he does.

Gale's fingers brush his as he takes the flask, letting it linger on his mouth before taking a long drag.

Bucky always thought he'd hoot and holler when he finally got Gale to take a drink. But tonight he realizes what the act really means.

Defeat.

"We're last to take off."

Bucky cocks his head and looks at Buck, "We are?"

Bucks nods, "We're the last base of B-17s to head back to the States. Word just came down that the rest of us are flying out in two days. After the base is cleared out."

Buck locks him with a significant look. He wonders if he should mention it, maybe he shouldn't, but Buck had made sure they were the last two B-17 pilots in the sky. Last to take off, last to land. He's overwhelmed for a moment, all his emotions fighting to rise out of him and getting caught and tangled in each other.

Clearing his throat, once, then twice, "See Buck, I told ya, when this whole this was done, last two pilots in the sky."

There's a wash of pink over Buck's cheeks, like he's embarrassed to have been called out, "That's not exactly what happening, Bucky."

Buck's smiling though, and so is Bucky, "It's close enough."

And that's as much as he's ever gonna get with Buck on so many things. Never exactly what he wanted, or wished for, but close

enough.

It's around 0930, the base was nothing more than a set of empty bunkers. For once, there were more B-17s than crews to man them, which meant crews in the planes were slimmed down. In their fort, for example, it was just him, Buck, and their navigator, a young recruit named William who'd showed up at Thorpe Abbots sometime in the *years* that he and Buck had been trapped in the Stalags.

England was nothing if not predictable, not even on their last flight would it treat them to clear, sunny skies. Giving them the cloudy, foggy soup, that they were so used to flying in, a final farewell that reminded him of every mission he'd flown from here. Reminded him of every man he'd gotten into a plane with that hadn't come back, of the ones he still didn't even know the fate of.

It's the cat in the box, if Bucky never knows their fate, they can be alive. They can be dead. But he doesn't have to deal with the fallout of it all. The joy or the sadness.

His emotions had been getting the better of him recently, he was clawing for control, trying to keep everything pushed down and in its place, but he was losing. He's never been good in the calm, always thrived in chaos, the more things that were happening the easier he could push through and bring everyone with him. But now, there was only calm, the war over. It's not that he *wanted* them to still be in the fight, but he'd been in it for so long he's not sure what he'll do without it.

Buck, though, was the one who could handle stagnancy, who could handle calm. It's why they were so good together. Buck took charge when there was nothing they could do, and Bucky did when there was just *too much*.

Even now, as he's walking toward their fort he can see Buck sitting in the left seat, checking the instrument panel and chatting with their navigator. He tries to remember this moment. The last time he might ever see Buck in the cockpit of their beloved B-17, the emotions bubble up again and he has to swallow them back down.

So he continues forward, flipping up into the fort and squeezing his way into the cockpit, it was easier now that there were no bombs in the bay, but Forts weren't built for tall people and he still had to hunch his way to sit next to Buck.

"Hey," Buck says by way of greeting, and lets out a sigh as John positions himself in the seat next to him, "This is it."

"This is it." it's an echo of before he ever left the States, and queue for both of them that something was ending and something new was beginning.

"You ready to go home?"

He can't answer that, it means he would have to mean he had a place that felt like home. So he avoids the questions and asks Buck about what he's looking most forward to, "You ready to see Marge?"

Buck groans and Bucky's not sure how to interpret it. It doesn't sound as excited as he thought Buck might be, seeing the woman he loved after so many years, but he also can't help but think that he's adding meaning to it that isn't actually there. So he just chuckles and Buck joins him.

"I bet," Bucky says and it's noncommittal enough that Buck can apply whatever meaning he wants to the words. He's happy to start running through the pre-flight check, it's as easy as breathing for them and it helps dispense with the awkwardness that hovers between them, "Form 1A?"

"Checked."

"Controls and seats?"

"Check."

"Fuel transfer valves and switch?"

"Off."

"Leaving a lot of good men behind." Bucky looks out the window he thinks of all the men they lost. *Biddick. Dickie. Bubbles. Claytor. Van Noy. Adams. Schmalenbach. Petrich.* Too many to name. He remembers the letters he sent home, he remembers the ache in his hands. All those emotions he'd been fighting to push down rise up, choking him.

"A lot of brave men," Buck gives him a sad smile, tears in his eyes.

"Yeah," And he has to look away if Buck loses it, he has no chance, "Intercoolers cold."

"Gear up."

"All right."

"All right. This is it."

And Bucky can't do anything but push down his tears, and listen as Buck counts off their speed. He wants to think that he's finally going home, but he doesn't know where home is anymore. Is it Manitowac? Thorpe Abbots? The Stalag? None of those answers feel right.

He'd never felt more at home than when he was sitting next to Buck in a B-17 and perhaps he couldn't answer the question because this would be the last time he'd be home ever again.

Chapter End Notes

Ugh sorry this is so late. I hope you enjoyed it!

Second to last chapter. I can't believe we all got here.

As always thanks to everyone to Commented, Kudo'd, and read. You are keeping me going.

Home

Chapter Summary

Coming home isn't as easy as getting off a plane.

Chapter Notes

Jeezy Creezy I am SO SO sorry this is late. I've had a bunch of stuff go on these past couple weeks and I got roped into hosting a bunch of people on Sunday. Also editing and rewrites for this chapter have been a little tough, but (as a bit of a consolation prize) I ended up writing down some notes for Buck's motivations and it turned into a 5K word (so far) story. So long excuse a little longer, there might be a follow-up story that will take place from Buck's POV during the timeframe of this chapter. Lemme know if that's a thing anyone wants or cares about.

Enjoy this LAST (I'm not crying you're crying) chapter!

Just putting the link here for no reason whatsoever https://youtu.be/6Af_PSZpiEU?si=0BnjMkQbTlfufN5Z

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They part after the war, it happens with little fanfare, Buck goes back to Wyoming and Bucky Wisconsin. He had known this day was coming, but it didn't mean it hurt any less. He'd let himself believe they could be together in the Stalag, but Buck had set him straight after their escape. He might be okay one day, without Buck, but that day was far away. That much he did know.

He's only home a week before he can't stand being in the house with his Ma- he loves her to death but he's met drill sergeants less annoying. So he finds a rental house not too far away from the lake and moves into it alone. It's odd being the only person in a building, he hadn't been truly alone anywhere since he enlisted in 1941. The house creaks when the wind blows and he takes to keeping the radio on so he doesn't jump at every noise.

As much as he'd longed for space and privacy he finds he just feels lonely.

The days pass, he gets a stupid job and goes back to his stupid rental house. Gets a drink at a stupid bar. Falls asleep alone in his stupid

bed. Everything is stupid and he counts the days since he last saw Buck. It's pathetic, he knows it is, but it's something to do. Maybe if he can make it to fifty it'll hurt less. If he can make it fifty days without Buck, he can make it fifty more. That's what he tells himself anyway.

They say time heals all wounds and he hopes it's true. But now, everything feels empty and stupid and meaningless.

On day Forty-six, his Ma comes to visit and brings his mail. There are a few letters from the Veterans Administration, a letter from Alex, a reply from Tommy, and a letter from Buck. He has to try with everything in him to not tear it open as soon as she hands it to him. He's proud of himself that he manages to wait until she leaves.

John,

I meant to write sooner, but I wasn't sure what to say, still don't, but here it goes-

Saw my Ma, she's happy to have me home and I guess I'm happy to be home, but I don't know what I'm supposed to do now that the war's over. Do I stay in the military? Go back to school? Teach? For all the things they trained us for in the war, they never trained us for coming home. Hope you are doing well.

Buck

It's nothing. It's barely even a letter. Buck had always been a man of few words but John still wished it had been more. He allows himself to lean forward and press his nose against the paper, as he'd seen Buck do so many times before to Marge's letters, but there's no aftershave, just the crisp smell of paper. He won't let himself be disappointed.

He does note the absence of any mention of a wedding, or Marge, but he won't let him read too much into it. Part of surviving is not allowing himself to apply meanings to things that don't have any. Like Buck not mentioning Marge, or Buck saying, what felt like a lifetime ago, that he felt the same way Bucky did.

Buck was probably just trying to spare his feelings. It's been more than a month since they arrived home and no doubt, Buck and Marge had gotten married straight away and Buck just didn't mention it to avoid having to walk back asking him to be his best man.

He sits down at his writing desk and starts a letter back.

Buck,

It's good to hear from you. I'm in the same boat you are. I don't know what to do with myself. I'm not smart like you, and I've got no head for school. Only things I'm good at are drinking and flying, and I think they'll only pay me for one of those. But I figure I can get a job doing, well, something. Not sure what yet.

Only spent a week at home. My Ma wouldn't give me an inch of space, and I thought the Stalags were bad. So I moved into town, I'm renting a house, you can even see the lake if you stand in the right window. Including my new address and phone.

Yo

Bucky

He could start again, write another copy without his mistakes, but for some reason he wants Buck to know, he wants Buck to see his name in Bucky's chicken scratch handwriting and the beginning of *Yours,* and know that what had happened between them had meant something, *still* meant something to him.

Once it's sealed up and sent off, John counts the days until he hears from Buck again. He second-guesses himself, maybe it's been stupid and obvious to send the letter like he did, or maybe Buck would just ignore him again. He doesn't really know what he wants to happen.

On day Sixty-two, there is another letter from Buck in his mailbox. Its appearance loosens the knot that had been sitting inside his chest since he'd posted the last letter.

Dear John,

Don't sell yourself short, you're plenty smart and don't let anyone ever tell you otherwise! Not only are you smart, but you're a leader. You're someone men follow because they want to, not just because they're told to. After what the world's just been through we could use more people like you to put us back right.

I've applied to some schools looking to get my MBA. Might even live on campus, or near it. You think those young college kids will wanna hang out with an old man like me? I was never as charming as you, I doubt they will.

I never thought it would be this damn hard to come home. After years

of being surrounded by people, basically piled on top of one another, it feels weird to have all this space to myself. All this quiet.

Buck.

Buck's belief in him always leaves him in awe, what did he ever do to deserve a friend like Buck Cleven? The letter brings a smile. He's so happy to hear that Buck has decided on something, Buck is too smart to sit in Wyoming doing nothing. But it must be a joke, Gale thinking he was less charming than him.

It's nice to know that he's not alone in having troubles coming home, it's nice to have Buck be able to share the struggles with him. He feels more relaxed when he writes back,

Buck, Buck, Buck!

Dear John? Really? You trying to break my heart? Don't scare a guy like that!

I know what you mean though, I miss the men, too. We're all so far apart now. Living alone in this house, it's both too quiet and too loud.

I heard from Crosby, he's got a little guy now, from the letter the little man seems to be keeping him on his toes, he's exhausted but he swears that it still isn't as bad as D-day. He told me that Rosie went back to Germany and he's lawyering the trials of those Nazi assholes, good for him.

I write Alex too! He's doing good, married his sweetheart, and thinking about becoming a school teacher. He asked if I wanted to come out to Detroit! I was thinking of going in the late summer, the Tigers aren't my team, but I'd still go and watch 'em if there's a game going on. Haven't heard much from anyone else, but that's how it goes right? You separate you lose touch.

Don't you worry, you'll have your pick of the litter when those schools finally get back to you. And what's this about people not liking you? There ain't no one in this whole goddamn world who could ever dislike Buck Cleven. I know that for a fact. You've got a certain charm about you, I mean, we're friends, right? And you don't even like baseball! You gotta have a hell of a personality for me to overlook a flaw like that!

John.

P.S. What's Marge gonna think of living on campus?

He doesn't get a response after that.

The months pass, and he counts the days, and he wonders if he'll get a letter or call from Buck asking him to come out to Wyoming for his wedding. Or even just a response to his last letter. He waits for a call he knows probably won't come, he doesn't even know if Buck has a house phone, he was lucky to get one in his rental.

All he knows is if Buck does ask him to be his best man, he'll go, he can't say no. He'll pack up his dress uniform and put on his best and brightest smile. That's if he hasn't already gotten married. (Bucky doesn't dwell too much on that thought)

To his math, the day count goes well into triple digits with no response. After a few whiskeys, he wonders if maybe Buck has forgotten all about him. If, after a few letters, Buck decided he didn't want someone like him in his life at all. A drinker, a gambler, a queer. If having someone like him in his life was too much of a liability.

The haze of alcohol is making the edges of his brain fuzzy, but he can't stop thinking about Buck's lack of response. He can't think of a damn thing he's put in his last letter that would have made Buck mad enough to ignore him. So he weighs his options, wonders if he should send another letter- letters get lost, right? They disappear all the time. He decides to try again.

Dear Buck,

Did you forget about your old pal, Bucky? I haven't heard-

He tears it up and tries again.

Buck,

I know you're busy getting ready for school, and with Marge, and-

He tears that on up too. He tries again after another shot of whiskey.

Buck, I'm sorry.

Nope. Again. He pours a double this time.

I miss you, Buck pleas-

Another try. Another shot.

Gale,

There are times when I try to remember who I was before the war, but all I can remember is you saying that this would be the version of me worth knowing. Do you still believe that?

Yours,

Bucky

He stumbles down to the post box and sends the letter before he has a chance to second-guess himself.

Each day that passes makes him feel a little emptier. Eventually, he stops hoping Buck will contact him. It's late spring now and the days are creeping towards the three-hundreds. He's always been a betting man, always believing in the most minute chances, but even he knows the odds aren't in his favor in this.

But there had been so many things he *had* been right about- being the last B-17s in the sky, they were the last to take off at Thorpe Abbotts and the last to land. He was right about making it through the war. He'd bet on him and Buck more times than he could count, but his luck had finally run out. There was no more him and Buck. There was just him and then there was just Buck.

It's mid-April and it's somehow warm enough to have the windows open, bright sunlight and warm breezes blowing the smell of damp warm earth through the house. Wisconsin springs are usually cold, but this spring has been kind. At least something is. The warmth is a small comfort in his isolation, he doesn't have the energy or capacity to try to be the old him, the one who went out dancing and drinking, he doesn't have it in him to force a smile a flirt with someone. There's no one he really cares to flirt with anyway.

He's sitting at the table pushing around what some might call dinner- alone, why wouldn't he be?- Then the phone rings.

It's probably the lady from down the street, she's been trying to get him to date her daughter after he mowed her lawn one time last summer. The old John would've jumped at the chance, but this new version of him, can't seem to find it in himself.

The phone keeps ringing and he almost just lets it, but he gets up from the table with a sigh and snatches the handle from the hook, "Hello,

John Egan speaking."

Even just by the intake of air on the other end, he knows it's Buck. Feels it in his very core.

"John Egan? I must have the wrong house, I'm looking for Bucky."

The warmth of Buck's voice makes his throat clench up, "Buck."

"Hey, Bucky."

John's at a loss for words, he sputters for a moment before, "How-how've you been, Buck?"

He can hear the smile in Buck's voice and closes his eyes to try to picture it.

"Restless. Been thinking maybe I should take a trip to Manitowoc, then I remembered I had a friend there."

"Jeez Buck," He laughs into the phone, "took you long enough to decide to come visit."

Bucky doesn't want to ask why Buck finally decided to call. Why he hadn't called or written in those months. He didn't want to mess it up. He didn't want to take the chance Buck might go away again.

They can't talk long, the phone call is probably costing Buck a fortune, so they decide on the date and time. And even knowing they should make it quick they're trying to wrap up the call without really wanting to.

"Tell Marge I said 'hi'." The other end is silent and Buck wonders if they got disconnected. "Buck?"

"I-" another pause, "Sure, John. I'll see you in a few weeks."

Bucky smiles, "See you in a few weeks."

He's about to hang up when, "Bucky?"

This moment feels heavy, "Yeah," he breathes.

"I mis-" Another pause, "I'm looking forward to seeing you."

"Yeah. Buck, me too."

The weeks fly by, he keeps himself busy so that they do. Bucky tries to take the week off from work for when Buck is in town, and when they tell him no he just quits. He still has money from his time in the Military and he didn't like that job anyway.

He cleans his house within an inch of its life. Gathers up the whiskey bottles and puts them to the curb. He goes to the grocery store and picks up some food to fill his woefully empty fridge, and even grabs the brand of ginger beer he knows Buck likes.

When the morning comes for him to get Buck from the train station he tries to make himself look extra good, he combs his hair just so. Makes sure his slacks are neat and ironed, the pleat running perfectly down the front of his leg. It's dumb, he knows it is, but even now he wants Buck to think he looks good. He fiddles around the house, wiping down counters and straightening up already tidy shelves, and when he can't stand it anymore he gets in his truck and heads to the train station. He shows up an hour too early and paces on the train platform.

The train crawls up the tracks as it comes to a stop and Bucky smooths down his shirt and brushes his hair back from where the sun had warmed the pomade and made his curls fall over his forehead. And when Buck finally steps off the train, duffle in hand, Bucky loses his breath. Buck's hair is slightly longer, skin more tanned than it had been, and the tension of his face that had been ever-present during the war has been smoothed away. He looks good. He looks breathtaking. He looks like the only thing in the world that matters.

Bucky shakes his head and raises his arm in a wave, he walks toward Buck and takes his duffle, wrapping an arm around Buck's shoulders as they walk towards his truck.

"God damn Buck, sure took you long enough!" He can smell Buck's aftershave and, God, how he had missed it. In some of his darker moments, he'd smelled the bottle in the store, but it was never the same. It had a different smell when Buck wore it.

Bucky can feel Buck's laugh through the arm across Buck's shoulders as they walk to the parking lot.

This is enough, he tells himself. This is enough.

Buck shows up and it's like nothing's changed, they fall into the same old rhythm they always had, ribbing each other and laughing like

they'd never been parted. Bucky had expected some awkwardness after the months that hadn't spoken or written to one another, but there wasn't. It just feels like the missing part of his life has returned.

They grab lunch at a diner and Buck tells him about the train ride and Wyoming, Bucky talks about the job he quit and what he thinks he might do next. It's comfortable and John starts to feel himself perk up, life is less stupid with Buck around. The thought worries him.

They drive to John's house and walk in through the garage. He carries Buck's bag, despite Buck's protests, and immediately shows Buck the spare bedroom and throws his bag onto the floor, "It ain't much, but it's better than the barracks."

They're standing in the doorway when Buck turns to him still laughing, "Better than a suite at the Stalag."

Buck's smile is wide and bright, and Bucky forgot how blue his eyes are, and he has to shake himself to stop staring at Buck. Bucky coughs, "Yeah, much better."

Buck steps into the room and does a slow turn, "Mind if I get cleaned up? It was a long train ride."

Backing up into the hall, Buck grabs a towel out of the linen closet behind him and tosses it to Buck, "Sure, Last door on the left. Even got hot water." He jokes.

Buck brushes past him on his way to the bathroom, "You sure do know how to treat a boy."

He won't read into that, it's just their normal banter. So he goes into the living room turns on the radio, and relaxes in his favorite chair watching the waves on the lake through the front window.

At some point, Buck must have come out of the shower and changed but Bucky doesn't hear him, he just feels a hand gently rest on his shoulder. When he turns, he sees Buck staring out the window with wide eyes, "You weren't kidding about standing in the right window, that's one hell of a lake."

Bucky wants to reach up and place his hand over Buck's, instead, he just grips the arm of the chair, "Sure is, You wanna take a walk by it?"

Buck looks down at him, a smirk playing across his features, "You won't let it swallow me up will you?"

Bucky smiles, "Don't count on it."

The walk down to the water is short, just at the end of his street then down some sun-bleached wooden steps to the beach. The wind whipping off Lake Michigan is chilly, but the waves are small and the blazing sun keeps it from being too cold. They walk along the beach in companionable silence. The waters lap on the sandy shores, and since it's the middle of the day and the water is still too frigid for swimming, no one is out on the beach except for them.

"I still feel like you're pulling my leg, telling me this is a Lake. I can't even see the other side."

Bucky laughs at Buck's awe, "It's a lake, or so they tell me. Just as dangerous as the ocean, though, ships go down in it all the time."

They keep bumping into each other as they walk, Bucky blames it on the uneven and shifting sand below their feet, he won't read anything into it.

"You never told me about this," Buck says quietly, just barely loud enough to be heard over the surf.

Bucky cocks his head, "What do you mean? Never told you about what?"

"This," Buck motions to the lake beside them, "Manitowoc. Your life here."

"Buck, there isn't much to tell," He keeps walking, but he can't help but feel this is about something else.

"I just," Buck sighs, "Feel like I should have known, is all."

Bucky stops, Buck makes it a few steps before he realizes Bucky isn't with him and turns around.

"When did you want me to tell you, Buck?" He sees Bucks jaw tighten but he keeps on, "Any time in the last ten months? When we kept writing all those letters to each other?"

Buck looks down, ashamed, "John, I..."

John starts walking again brushing past Buck, "Forget I said anything, don't even worry about it." But now Buck isn't following him, "C'mon Buck, I-"

"You're right," Buck says, holding his gaze.

And John closes his mouth with a snap, and Buck takes another few steps forward to shorten the distance between them.

"I just," Buck sighs again, he was never much of a talker so John gives him time to sort out his words, "I fell off the face of the earth and I just expected you to be there when I came back. That wasn't fair of me."

"No, it wasn't," he brings his eyes to meet Buck's, they're the color of the bright blue skies behind them, and Buck doesn't look away, "Why did you fall off the face of the earth?"

Buck works his jaw, "When I got home, I felt, different. I thought it was just coming home, that I'd settle in a few months but I didn't. I had to figure some things out, on my own."

"And did you?"

"I did."

Bucky waits for him to elaborate, but Buck keeps silent. He wasn't going to pry it out of him, if Buck wanted to tell him he would.

They walk in silence for a time longer and the sun starts to lower in the sky. Finally, after what feels like forever they turn around and head back the way they came.

They're almost back to the stairs when Buck says, "I called it off with Marge."

Bucky stops dead in his tracks and Buck stops with him, of all the things he expected to hear that sure wasn't it.

Buck catches his gaze and holds it.

"Buck...I-" John can't find the words, he settles on, "I'm sorry."

"I'm not," Buck says as he walks up the rickety stairs back to the house.

Buck doesn't bring up Marge again. And neither does Bucky.

He offers to cook up some dinner on the grill in his back yard, it's unseasonably warm in Wisconsin for spring and Bucky doesn't want to

waste a second of it being inside. Especially after being cooped up in his house for a long cold winter.

Buck and him chat as he cleans the potatoes and wraps them in tin foil. He reaches behind inside his fridge grabbing a beer for himself and a ginger beer for Buck.

The small, pleased smile on Buck's face makes Bucky's chest squeeze. He distracts himself by unwrapping the steaks from the fridge.

"You remembered my brand."

Bucky pretends he doesn't hear Buck, and seasons the steaks with salt and pepper.

Buck leans next to him on the counter taking a long drink from the bottle in his hand, John watches his throat move. There are a million thoughts he pushes down as he flips the steaks and seasons the other side.

Buck sighs in satisfaction, "Didn't know you were such a chef, John."

Bucky laughs and piles the food onto a platter and heads outside, "Well, I'm not. Seein' as this is really the one of the few things I can make."

They sit and talk while John cooks, they talk about everything, the ranch Buck worked at when he got back, flight school, their time at Thorpe Abbotts, how the rest of the guys are doing, and what they're all up to. It's nice to talk to someone who understands, who knows what to avoid, and what's safe to talk about.

"Got into Harvard," Buck says, offhandedly, like it isn't something wildly impressive.

Bucky takes a swallow of his beer to try to stifle his laugh, some things never change, "That's great, Buck! I knew you'd be a shoo-in, what ya going for?"

"Just my MBA, but I was thinking I might take some classes about space," Buck almost sounds a little bashful when he says it, like it's something he might get chastised for- Bucky can't let that stand.

"That's great, Gale, really. If anyone's gonna get us up there it's gunna be you." And he means it, Buck is the smartest person he knows, and if he sets his mind to something he'll make it happen.

Buck looks up at him, "You really think so?"

And for a moment he can't believe that Buck really seems this unsure of himself, "Of course I do."

Buck smiles, it's a small thing, fragile, but it warms his features, "You still coming with me when I go?"

Bucky laughs, "Only if you're flying'."

They take their food into the kitchen and eat at the table. He can't help but think of all the nights he sat alone eating whatever he managed to scrounge up. He likes this much better, eating a good meal with someone he loves.

And there it is.

No matter how long it's been, Bucky can't help but love Buck. Maybe that means he'll die a lonely old man but for now, at least for now, he can be with Buck. Even if it's just as a friend.

Buck breaks Bucky's train of thought by pushing his empty plate away, "I know you said it's the only thing you can cook, but it was pretty damn delicious."

John leans back in his chair, "Well good. Can't have you going around saying I'm a bad host. Then no one will come visit me."

Buck looks at John for a long time, eyes looking over his face. Bucky starts to grow uncomfortable and tries to make a joke, "I got something on my face, Buck?"

Buck looks down, bashful, "Naw, I uh," He rubs the back of his neck as he stands, "Where's your record player, Bucky?"

Now Bucky is even more confused, he points through the doorway into the living room at the record player on the table in front of the bay window.

Buck leaves, there's a rustling down the hall, and then he walks into the living room, pulls the curtains, and puts a record on.

The first notes start to play and Bucky stands up so fast his chair screeches against the linoleum floor.

It's Benny Goodman, it's 'Taking a Chance on Love'. It was the song he

sang to Buck all those years ago when they ended up spending the night together.

It's hard not to read into this.

"Buck?" It's more an exhalation of breath than a word, but Buck hears him anyway.

Buck turns around, a small unsure smile on his face, "You gonna keep staring or are you gonna dance with me, John?"

♪Here I go again, I hear the trumpets blow again♪

He's rightly not sure, Bucky is too dumbstruck to do much of anything, even so, he dumbly shuffles his way into the living room. He stops just short of Buck and finds his voice, just barely, "What're you doing, Buck?"

Buck smirks, taking John's hand and pulling it around his waist, holding his other hand in his, "Takin' a chance."

♪Starry-eyed again, takin' a chance on love♪

"Thought you didn't dance," Bucky says dumbly, pressing closer to Buck as they sway.

"I don't. Only exception is you," Buck looks up at him from under his eyelashes and the smile gets bigger on his face, "And Meatball."

This startles a laugh out of John, and he presses closer into Buck, and Buck lets him.

♪Things are mending now, I see a rainbow blending now.

We'll have a happy ending now, takin' a chance on love♪

John's not sure what to think, he feels like a teenager at his first dance, trying to talk to the girl he likes, "Buck, what is this?"

Buck looks down taking a deep breath, then looking into Bucky's eyes, "Part of what I figured out when I fell off."

The song starts to fade out, and the next starts.

Bucky barely breathes, "Which was?"

"That for some reason, of all the people in the world, you're the one I

can't do without."

Bucky clenches his jaw but he can't look away from Buck's gaze.

"Jesus, Buck. You sure know to put a guy through the wringer." He steps away, letting Buck's hands fall away, dragging his hand down his face, "You serious?"

"Never been more serious in my life," Buck clenches and unclenches his hands at his sides, "Back in the Stalag, I meant it when I said I wanted to try."

He's apprehensive to believe it, he can't take another heartbreak, "I know you did, Buck."

"Then why don't you sound like you believe me?" It's not accusatory, just hurt.

"Because you *left me*," It's not often John lashes out, but there are a thousand and one emotions swirling in him and he can't keep them in check. Hurt being the largest and toughest to push down.

Buck chews on his bottom lip, "I know, I'm sorry."

"I want to believe you, Gale, I do. But it's been months. I can't believe you just cause you say you meant it, you've left me high and dry too many times for me to just believe you. I all but expected you to come here and tell me you set the wedding date for you and Marge."

Buck's jaw clenches as he nods, there is annoyance in Buck's voice that Bucky can tell he's trying to cover up, "I told you, me and her are through, I broke it off."

"And why did you break it off with Marge? Huh? What happened there?" His response is whip-sharp and he promised himself he wasn't going to bring up Marge unless Buck did, but everything was unraveling and all bets were off.

Buck takes a deep breath, then another, "Felt different when I got home. I love Marge. Part of me always will," stops and meets Bucky's eyes, they're sure like he's finally come to a decision, " I took some time on my own, needed to look at what I was doing. What I really wanted." He takes another deep breath and squares his shoulders like he's bracing for a hit, "I don't love her like I love you, Bucky. Not even close."

John stops breathing, stunned. The moment stops or drags, Bucky doesn't know, but finally, he says, "Say it again."

"I love you, John Egan. I love you." It's clear and it's true and as scared as Buck looks right now, there's no lie behind his eyes.

John stands hand over his mouth and his other hand on his hip. Part of him wants to punch Buck in the face, another wants to kiss the life out of him, and another still wants to scream at him until his face is blue, he doesn't know what to do.

"John," Buck's voice is desperate, "Bucky, say something, please."

"No." And John realizes how stupid it is to refuse to say something by saying something, but he finally meets Buck's eyes and he knows what part of him wins out.

Taking two strides towards Buck, he grabs Buck's face in his hands bringing their lips together in a fervent kiss. It's been so long since he got to do this, he doesn't know who moaning into the kiss, maybe it's both of them, but God, it's better than he remembered.

Bucky pulls back, leaving his hands on Buck's cheeks, panting into his mouth.

Buck smiles as he exhales against John's lips, "Talk about putting a guy through the wringer."

They play more records and keep dancing long into the night. Each of them only pulling away long enough to pick something new and come back to one another. They keep it slow, pressed close to one another. Bucky doesn't know who's leading and he doesn't care, Buck has his face pressed into Bucky's neck as they sway and twirl, holding each other like they're afraid the other will disappear.

At some point, the record is skipping and they're barely moving, "We should get some sleep, Buck."

Buck doesn't lift his head, so when he speaks Bucky can feel his warm breath against his neck, "You gonna make me sleep alone?"

A laugh escapes him, Bucky could never deny Gale anything, that should be clear by now, "Not unless that's what you want. But we are *just* sleeping, Buck."

They shuck their clothes until they're left in just their undershirts and

boxers and Buck sleeps in Bucky's bed. It's been so long since he's had Buck next to him; Listening to his heartbeat, curling up close as the cool breeze came in the open window. He falls asleep deeper and faster than he has since before the war. He didn't realize he was so tired, he doesn't think either of them did. They're asleep in minutes wrapped in each other, legs tangled, just how John's been missing.

Bucky wakes before Buck in the morning, Buck has always been a heavy sleeper and a late one at that. The morning is gray and damp, and he pulls the covers over Buck's shoulders before he gets up to make some coffee. He throws the grinds into the percolator and walks around the house closing the windows they had left open, trying to block out some of the chill.

Everything feels the same and different. He had come to the realization of his feelings for Buck years ago, but he had been convinced that those feelings would go with him to the grave. Then in the Stalag, he thought that, maybe, just maybe, Buck felt the same. But then after they'd returned to England, Buck pushed him away, and he was back to shoving those feelings down into a place where they couldn't hurt him anymore.

But then last night, Jesus.

John pours himself a cup of coffee off the stove and leans against the kitchen counter to stare out the window, watching the birds as they chase each other through the trees in the early morning. Coffee's too hot to drink, but he wanted something to do with his hands. The warmth seeps through the mug and into his fingers, the house is chilly, the sky is gray and he doesn't have the heart to wake Buck just yet.

And part of him wants to rush into the bedroom and wake Buck with a kiss, let himself play out all the dreams he'd discounted as impossible years before. But yet still another part can't believe it's real. This isn't the first time something has happened between them, hell, it's not even the second, and each time John's had his heart broken. He wouldn't survive it again, he'd fall so deep into that dark abyss that he'd never claw his way back out.

So the longer he lets Buck sleep the longer so he can put off the conversation he doesn't want to have. It's part of why he didn't let it go any farther than kissing last night, he needs to keep Buck at arm's length until he knows. Really *knows*.

Sure, he knows Buck loves him, and goddamn if just that much didn't make his resolve crumble entirely, but what does that mean? It didn't fix anything, it didn't even change all that much, they could love each other and still not be together.

He's postponed long enough, he takes a sip of his coffee and grabs another mug from the cabinet, filling it with coffee and then grabbing the milk out of the fridge. This was not a day that could be faced without coffee and the least he could do was wake Buck up with a cup, a dollop of milk, no sugar, just how he liked.

He brings the mugs into the bedroom, sets them on the nightstand, and climbs back into bed. Buck was always a furnace and now is no different, the heat envelopes him and he settles under the covers, the chill from the house melting away. Buck still hasn't woken up, it was always amusing to John how much of a sound sleeper Buck was, still is.

He brushes the hair off his forehead and looks at his face, how relaxed he is in sleep, "Hey Buck." Buck's face scrunches and it almost makes Bucky giggle, "Comon' sleeping beauty, your coffee's getting cold."

Buck's face scrunches again, but this time his eyes crack open, "Bucky?"

"Yeah, Buck," He brushes Buck's hair back again, it's soft under his fingers, he's never really had the opportunity to take a slow morning with Buck, it was nice.

A slow, sleepy smile spreads over Buck's face, "For a second I thought I dreamed it all."

Bucky turns away grabbing Buck's coffee from the nightstand, "You might still be dreaming."

Buck laughs, coffee in hand, and scoots up to rest against the headboard. He hums as he takes a sip of his coffee, "You still remember how I like it."

If it were any other day Bucky might be embarrassed, but not today, "You're really surprised?"

"Guess not," Buck smiles into his mug, and takes another sip.

Bucky leans back against the headboard, and puts his head on Buck's shoulder, after a moment, Buck rests his head on his.

"How long you stayin', Buck?" Now seemed as good a time as any.

"Depends," Buck traces the rim of his mug with his fingertips, "I'll have to go to Boston before the school year starts."

"That's not really an answer."

Bucky can feel the deep intake of breath that Buck takes before he speaks, "No, but I heard there are some good spots for dancing in Boston, some that are for people like us." He clears his throat and his next words sound afraid, "Thought you might wanna tag along. Paint the town red."

Bucky lifts his head, and looks him in the eye, "People like us?"

"Yeah," Buck swallows hard, "Men who love other men."

"Is that what we are?"

Buck sits up, puts his cup on the opposite nightstand, and turns back, bringing their eyes back together, "It's what I feel for you." He sighs," I can't- I can't say where this will end, but I want to be with you, whatever it takes." Buck drops his hands onto the bed, looking worse than men he'd seen come off their first mission. "So when you ask how long I'm stayin', it's however long you'll have me."

"I can't handle another heartbreak, Buck. I won't survive it," the words feel like they're ripped from his chest, but there can't be any confusion.

Buck's chin quivers as he nods, "I was such an idiot, still am, but I'll do everything in my power to do better. I can't promise I won't ever hurt you, but I won't ever leave you again, not by my choice."

It's a weighty promise, but it's one that rings true, "What happened? At Thorpe Abbotts, you just- just pushed me away."

"I know" Bucky fiddles with the seam of the bedspread for a few moments, "I got scared. I got out, and you didn't-" Buck grabs Bucky's hand and kisses his knuckles like the thought of what he just said made seek proof of John's existence "-I didn't know what happened to you, you could've died and I wouldn't have known. No one could tell me what happened to you. I was so scared."

Bucky squeezes their hands, it's more open than Bucky can ever remember Buck being, so he stays silent.

"I couldn't put you in a spot like that again. Living like this, it won't be easy, it won't be safe," Buck takes another deep and steady breath, "I thought if I pushed you away you'd find someone else. A lady. Thought I could keep you safe that way."

"That isn't a decision you get to just make, Buck," It's an admonishment, but a gentle one. Bucky understands why, he would do anything to keep Buck safe.

"I know," Buck's mouth twists into a sad smile, "Another thing I figured out while I was on my own."

"Jeez, Buck, didn't know you were such a goddamn martyr!" He wraps his hand around his neck and pulls him in to kiss him on the forehead, "When on earth have we ever played anything safe?"

Buck exhales what might be a laugh through his nose, but his face turns solemn again, "This isn't war, Bucky, where one day it'll end and the hardships will be over. This will be the rest of our lives if I have any say in it, and it could be the best thing to ever happen to us, but it'll be hard and it could be dangerous. So this has to be your choice too."

"Then that's easy," There's a healthy amount of fear in Buck's eyes, and in that moment Bucky realizes it's not just him who wouldn't survive being pushed away. "When should we start packing for Boston?"

Buck lets out a shuddering laugh as a smile splits his face, leaning forward to press their mouths together, "Yeah?"

Bucky kisses him lazily, there's no need to rush now, they have as much time as they need, "Yeah, Buck. You're stuck with me."

"Good," He hums into Bucky's mouth as he pulls away and climbs up to straddle Bucky's hips, "Right now, though, there's something else I'd rather be doing."

There isn't much between them, just the thin fabric of their boxers and Bucky takes the opportunity to run his hands under Gale's shirt, "Yeah, we can definitely talk later."

He can feel the trembling breath Buck takes under his fingers, the way his breath speeds up at his touch. It's a wonder he was ever able to keep his hands off Buck. Maybe he'd known that if he let himself touch again he'd never be able to stop.

"You gonna kiss me John, or just keep drivin' me crazy." Buck's voice is a little breathless and Bucky's warm in the knowledge that Buck is just as gone for him as he's ever been for Buck.

Bucky slides his hands down under the back of Buck's boxers and pulls them close together, John's almost drunk on the gasp that comes from Buck's mouth.

"Is that what you want, Buck?" John noses Buck's jaw, letting his breath ghost along Buck's jaw and neck.

Buck squirms, "Jesus. Yes, John."

He looks up at Buck, and it's a new perspective for him, he likes looking up at Buck, especially when he's in John's lap. He gives Buck a quick, playful kiss before he pulls back, but Buck growls and pulls them together and John laughs at Buck's eagerness.

It's short-lived, it's not long before he loses himself licking into Buck's mouth, gripping Buck's ass, and grinding them together. His other hand roams under Buck's shirt, running his hand over Buck's taught skin. It's not enough just to touch, Bucky wants to *see*, and he pulls the undershirt over Buck's head.

When he looks though, he sees four round, evenly spaced scars across Buck's chest. They'd all been scared up during the war, but this wasn't just a cut or a scrape. He lets his finger trial over them, "What the hell are these, Buck?"

Buck laughs, looking down, "Lost consciousness on the way out of the plane when I got shot down, when I woke up, a farmer had his pitchfork dug in my chest. Poor guy was more scared than I was."

Bucky lets out an exasperated sigh, "'Course you'd think something like that is funny."

They've never had time before, Bucky has never been able to look and kiss and worship Buck like he's always wanted to. All he ever got were frenzied trysts, and now he wants to take his time, so Bucky slowly kisses the four scars along his chest, letting his tongue caress the soft skin there, Buck slides his hands into Bucky's hair and holds him there.

It's not long before Buck's hands run down his back pulling the hem of his shirt. And Bucky laughs, he's tried for so long not to think about their first time, but now he can't help but remember how insistent

Buck had been about getting him naked.

He pulls back just long enough for Buck to get his shirt over his head, then leans forward again to capture Buck's nipple in his mouth. That was another thing he didn't let himself think about for a long time. What Buck liked. But now, it felt dumb not to remember, especially when Buck was letting out contented sighs and soft moans as his hands roamed Bucky's back.

As much as he'd tried to block himself from thinking about that night in the hotel, one thing he couldn't block from his mind was how Buck had felt in his mouth, the sounds he'd made as Bucky licked and sucked him. It had always been a regret that he'd stopped so soon after he started, and that was a regret he was looking to remedy.

John pushes them forward so Buck is on his back and John is in between his legs, which come to wrap around him and pull him closer, John rocks into him, and Buck gasps his name underneath him. Even if it's just their boxers they are wearing too many clothes.

Bucky tries to roll them to the side, but Buck's thighs hold him firm, he laughs into Buck's mouth again, "Buck, let's at least get our boxers off."

Buck's legs uncurl from around him as they bother trying to pull off their own and each other's boxers, laughing and fumbling, and kissing until both pairs land somewhere on the floor.

But Bucky is a man on a mission and now that they've dispensed with the rest of their clothing, he focuses on his next objective. He pushes Buck back onto his back and kisses down his chest. Buck's dick is still beautiful, and god if he hasn't thought about this more times than he was willing to admit.

"Bucky-"

Bucky stops him by licking a long strip up the underside of his cock. He uses one hand to hold Buck's hip down, while the other comes to wrap around the base, he still doesn't know what he's doing, but hell if he wasn't enthusiastic about trying. He takes in as much as he can, hollowing out his cheeks and working his tongue, he loves the weight of Buck in his mouth the taste that leaks out of him as he sucks and licks. He's determined this time, he wants to make Buck come in his mouth.

He licks Buck's head, swirling his tongue around the tip before taking

him back in as far as he can, Buck's hand finds its way into his hair and pulls which just makes him moan around Buck's dick, which makes Buck moan and pull his hair more. It's a vicious cycle he'd like to ride out. Buck's moans keep growing in volume as does the rutting of his hips.

"Bucky, I'm gonna, John I'm-"

He knows Buck is trying to warn him off but he just takes him deeper into his mouth, he can feel Buck's cock twitching and Buck's warning just adds to his anticipation. Buck pulls his hair *hard* as he pulses into John's mouth, and he's not surprised when it happens, but he's still not prepared.

He's able to swallow some of it, the bitter salt of Buck's come washing over his tongue, but some spills out of his mouth, down his chin, and Buck's cock. He pulls off, panting but satisfied.

Bucks releases the hold in his hair and uses his thumb to wipe the mess from John's mouth, panting, "Jesus, Bucky, warn a guy."

Bucky crawls up kissing him deeply, and Buck seems more into the kiss than he would have thought, in fact, Buck licks into his mouth and sucks on his bottom lip eager to taste himself on Bucky's lips. Reaching down to take Bucky's cock in his hand, still wet with his come and Bucky's spit. It's fucking filthy and Bucky loves it.

He's not experienced when it comes to this, sex with other men, sex with Buck, but he won't say that he's not willing to use his imagination. He rolls off Buck, dislodging the hand around him, and rolls Buck away from him onto his side.

Buck turns his head to look at Bucky, confused, "Bucky, what are you doing?

Bucky just kisses him, "Trying something out, just tell me if you want me to stop."

He spits in his hand, reaching down between Buck's legs, the soft space between his thighs, it's already wet from earlier and Bucky spreads the mess around, slicking up Buck's thighs, palming his balls. Buck's pushing back against him, pressing his ass against Bucky's erection. Bucky moans into his shoulder, he'd love to fuck Buck, but he has no clue how to do it without hurting him, so he guides his cock down between Buck's thighs, fucking into the slick, warm wetness there.

Buck squeezes his thighs together, turning his head back to kiss John again, it's less a kiss than both of them panting into each other's mouth but John doesn't care. The tip of his dick is sliding between Buck's thighs and hitting his balls as he thrusts, and John reaches around to Buck's cock to find it half-hard again.

It's difficult for him to keep his pace, for him to keep time touching Buck, the pressure is building in him and he's not sure how much longer he can hold out. He's so close.

Then Buck tangles his hand in John's hair and says, "Comon' darlin', I wanna hear you."

And John comes with a long groan, spilling in between Buck's legs.

He wraps his arms around Buck holding him tightly to him, panting and mouthing his shoulder as he tries to regain his faculties.

Buck starts to pull away but John's arms tighten, "Not yet, Buck, please."

Buck's small laugh startles John, "Just wanted to turn and look at you is all."

Slightly embarrassed, Bucky loosens his grip and allows Buck to turn in his arms. Buck is disheveled in a way Bucky's never seen, a way that he knows he'll want to see as many times as possible. There's never been a more beautiful person John's seen in his entire life.

Buck's hand comes up to brush the sweat-damp curls from Bucky's forehead, placing a small kiss on the tip of his nose, "I'm not going anywhere. I promise. I'm not leaving you unless you make me."

"Then you won't ever have to," Bucky closes his eyes and basks in Gale's touch, "I love you, Gale. I've loved you for so long."

When he opens his eyes, there is a deep sadness in Gale's face, he rests his forehead against Bucky's, "I love you too, John. I'm just so sorry it took me so long to figure it out."

They fall asleep like that, lying upside down in the bed, curled against each other.

John's not sure how long he sleeps, but when he wakes, Buck has cleaned them up, and thrown a blanket over him. Buck is leaning

against the headboard, legs tangled with his, under the same blanket, drinking what is now a stone-cold cup of coffee. With no small amount of satisfaction, he does note that Buck hasn't put on any clothes.

Buck holds a piece of paper in his hands, and Bucky knows immediately what it is; the picture of him and Buck Alex had drawn back in the Stalag. Since he'd come home it'd been at his bedside, it not only reminded him of Buck, but of Alex. The man who knew exactly what he was and still befriended him, even supported him. He'd kept in touch with Alex since the war ended, even spent a few days in Detroit with him.

Buck flips the paper around and his and Buck's faces are staring back at him, "Alex draw this?"

Coming up on his elbows, "Yeah," He laughs, "told me he'd drawn everyone's sweetheart, thought I might like mine."

Buck looks at the drawing again, a fond smile coming to rest on his face, "He sure doesn't miss a thing."

"He sure doesn't," Buck laughs and sits the rest of the way up, crossing his long legs beneath the blanket, "I told him for it to be a sweetheart they have to feel the same way about you," Buck's gaze shoots to him, "At the time, I didn't think you did, and the bastard, without missing a beat goes 'I only draw what I see'. That sure sent me for a hell of a loop."

He'd meant it to be a funny story, something that would make Buck smile, but Buck was still looking at him in that same intense way.

"I did feel the same. I *do*."

Bucky feels a little devious, "Sure took you long enough to figure it out and let me know."

Buck shakes his head, "I won't argue that. But I do love you. And I did then too. I was just too messed up to know what to do with it."

And it's so earnest that he can't help but make a joke, if he doesn't, he'll start kissing Buck and they will never leave this bed. So he laughs, "Whatever you say, pretty boy."

Buck does smile now, "Pretty boy, eh? That might just mean something coming from you."

"Oh, it does," Bucky crawls up the bed, over Gale, and gives him a quick kiss, "But right now, I'm starving. I'm gonna cook us some breakfast."

"You gonna do it just like that?" Buck watches him walk around the room naked, with no small amount of appreciation.

Bucky laughs as he pulls on a fresh pair of boxers and a t-shirt, "While I can *guarantee* you it would be a worthwhile show, I gotta protect the goods."

Buck covers his face with his hands, and laughs, "Jesus, John."

He picks up Buck's boxers and shirt and throws them at him, hitting his hands and falling into his lap, "Oh, you love me."

Buck smiles, wide and brilliant, "Like a stone in my shoe."

John heads into the kitchen, remakes the coffee, and decides on eggs and toast. One of the three meals he can actually make.

He hears Buck rustling around in the bedrooms before he comes out and hugs him from behind as he fries up some eggs for them.

"This is better than I thought it could be," Buck mutters into his shoulder.

Bucky turns his head placing a kiss on the top of his head, "Never knew you were such a sap, Buck."

Buck rolls his head and places a kiss on the back of John's neck, "Only with you, Bucky, only with you."

They eat breakfast and laze around the living room, listening to the radio and reading. They don't bother to change out of their t-shirts and boxers, just relaxing on the couch, legs tangled in one another's, relishing the comfortable silence the other provides. The day stays gray and cool, the sun never managing to burn through the clouds, it almost reminds him of their days in England. And for the first time he can remember, he feels content, and happy, and relaxed.

Buck wasn't wrong when he said this was better than he thought it could be, he had never felt so at home with another person. It's only when Buck's smiling eyes meet his eyes over his coffee mug that he realizes that Buck *is* his home.

He's finally home.

It's the heat of summer, and Boston is hotter than any summer he's ever had in Manitowoc. The windows of their top-floor apartment are open, fans blowing hot air across them, and here is music from down the street drifting in the window.

It's too hot for either of them to wear a shirt but Buck is still under his arm, lying on his chest. He remembers all those years ago when he thought he'd want Buck pressed against him in the dead heat of summer, and he hadn't been wrong. It was hot and it was sticky, but it was still better than anything.

It's not perfect. Not even close to it. They both still wake up from nightmares. The Fourth of July is hell. They had to be careful, outside this room, they were just two best friends who decided to live together after the war. But when all is said and done. He comes home to Buck. And on Friday nights they walk down to *Punch Bowl* and dance the night away. Turns out Buck does like to dance.

There are other people like them here. Buck hadn't been lying when he'd said that there were places in Boston for them. There was a community here, small and discreet, but still a thriving community where he and Buck could live and find support.

Buck rolls his head around on Bucky's chest, "Ugh, what I wouldn't give for one cool breeze."

He just kisses the top of Buck's head, "I wouldn't change a single thing. Not a goddamn thing."

Chapter End Notes

> These were the original ending sentences and I thought I would share them.
>
> -Bitch this is cannon divergence and they end up in Boston and dance with each other at punch bowl. And live forever. -
>
> But in all seriousness, there was a real honest-to-god gay community thriving in Boston in the 40's and 50's. read more in the link below.
> https://blo.org/underground-gay-life-thrived-2/
>
> Good god, this was a bear, I hope you all enjoyed it as much and I

loved hearing from all of you! The comments and kudos kept me motivated throughout this whole story! This is my longest (published) story and it was a toughie to get it all out! I love you all!

You can find me on Tumblr Here , so come scream at me if you feel so inclined.

Like I mentioned above there *may* be another part to this series from Buck's POV. It wasn't really planned so I have no clue if/ when it'll be done.

*insert Frodo Baggins 'it's done' meme *

End Notes

Hey so this started out as a dumb little drabble and now it's 46k works so that's neat I guess.

Find me on tumblr Here
Planning on posting chapters on Sundays, this fic is completed, just gotta do some editing.

Hope you enjoyed it!

Works inspired by this one

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!